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## Intertidal No. 1

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## Intertidal No. 1

### Authors

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# INTERTIDAL

SPRING 2023

NO. 1



# **INTERTIDAL**

## **NO. 1**



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## EDITORS' NOTE

Dear Reader,

Picking up where *Byzantium* left off was no small task. *Byzantium* was the English department's award-winning annual literary journal produced entirely by undergraduate students, publishing literary works since the 1990s.

This year, the *Intertidal* editorial team sought to reformulate the structure of *Byzantium* by expanding submission acceptance from beyond the English department to the entire Cal Poly community and encouraging broader participation in micropublishing.

Micropublishing reduces exclusionary gatekeeping practices by presenting the best interest of the historically marginalized communities. Since the beginning, we've also been very transparent with writers about how the editorial team would review submissions and the estimated timeline of printing the journal during workshops.

*Intertidal* is a literary and arts journal, first created by California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, undergraduate students for their senior project. First printed in Spring of 2023, the journal developed from a pioneering sequence of classes aimed at educating students in the field of editing and publishing using the 'Learn by Doing' method.

—  
We are beyond honored to announce the inaugural publishing of the *Intertidal* journal. We couldn't have done it alone, and would like to take the opportunity to thank the

following people:

Thank you to Monica Reyes, a Cal Poly Graphic Communication alumna with a concentration in Design Technology Reproduction concentration and IT Packaging minor, and associate of the Shakespeare Press Museum, whose skill made our journal come to life. Thank you to the Shakespeare Press Museum, a 19th century working letterpress museum aka a treasure of the Cal Poly campus, featuring the Charles Palmer collection. Thank you to Monica again for teaching us how to use

the various presses in creating our initial "Call for Submissions" flyers in Fall Quarter.

We appreciate the Cal Poly English Department for providing students with the opportunity to explore a wide range of professions within the English degree. We also thank them for the funding given to produce this artifact. Thank you to Cheri Love, one of our Health Center therapists who baked delicious cookies and brownies for our winter quarter, "Blind Date with a Book" fundraiser. We would also like to thank all faculty who donated books for this event.

Finally, we thank our friend and project advisor Dr. Shanae Martinez for their devotion and encouragement in envisioning *Intertidal* as a home for uplifting the unheard narratives and voices of historically marginalized communities.

And, of course, all our gratitude toward our contributors who made the magic happen, one word and brushstroke at a time. We see this issue as a celebration of all literary and artistic experiences. You will encounter a remarkable span of imagination ranging anywhere from short fiction penned by engineering and business majors to visual art created by liberal arts majors, Cal Poly faculty, and staff. Thank you to our readers, for picking up this journal filled with different flavors of creativity. We hope, at any rate, that you've brought your appetite with you.

Warmly,

The *Intertidal* No. 1 Editorial Team

## CONTENT WARNING

Some works touch upon sensitive topics and imagery. Content warnings include (but are not limited to): experiences of trauma, eating disorders, forms of death, sexual coercion, depression, PTSD, family conflicts, gun violence, and war.

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## Untitled Elsie Wordal



## In an Artist's Studio Adriana Dutra

We always scroll for the Instagram version, but I got the papier-mâché man instead. Amid the fragility of the construction, the abstraction, I can see tears running down his papier mâché cheeks for the me he can't touch. And I can't break the ideal either, so we move forward in an imprisonment of consciousness. Together we watch the sherbet Central Coast sunset through etched eyes and let it melt onto the sand and into our mouths. We swallow and it's unsurprisingly salty. I smile a little because his glue melts into me too from inky lips.

His tattered pages fill me up like laundry in an electric soul with a washing machine pulse. I don't have much change left to pay for it. I count down the moments and coins like rosary beads until I forget him there soaking and incomplete. The next morning, I fold him and delete him because impermanence is bliss. I scroll through more sheets for a similar love with a stronger current. I wonder how much my electric bill is. PG&E, I detest thee.

That night, I dreamt cigarette dreams of him. I crumpled his sheets of paper and smoked them until they were gone, discarded, turned to ash. I smoked the intoxicating fabrication of his young heart for my own gratification. I closed my eyes from the haze to extract one final, fatal, inebriate inhalation. I left him devitalized and in the past. Oh, what a waste. I fell back asleep. Maybe I'll build a papier-mâché lover myself someday. I can build anything.

# The Occupied House

## Ashley Lang

Your grandpa was pushed down the stairs. Or so he claims. Your mother exchanged exasperated looks with your father when she got the call, her fingers lowering the volume on her cellphone's speakerphone as his loud voice ranted through the phone. He had called from the borrowed hospital telephone to tell your mother that he was furious at the live-in helper who he was adamant had pushed him. He'd always been one to embellish his stories and what was probably just an ordinary fall from one stair turned into a malicious attempt at hurting him. It didn't help that he lived alone after your grandma passed away a few years ago. With his refusal to accept any other live-in help, and his slow recovery after the fall, your family moves back into the neighborhood that had been your childhood neighborhood to better take care of him.

Your family grudgingly packs their belongings and moves back to the street where you used to live, only a couple of houses down from your grandpa's house. You don't move into the same house that you used to live in, though.

"Why didn't we move back into it then?" you ask her, as you help load boxes into the car. Every box you move out of the house feels like you're removing the vital organs of the house, leaving behind only its bare skeleton. At your question, your mother's face changes. Usually a composed and resolute woman, your mother's face contorts into a grimace before she can stop herself, porcelain skin cracking into broken lines of disgust. Her eyes seem to unfocus as she looks somewhere into the distant past. "The people living there now aren't willing to sell," she said in a voice that was pitched too high to sound like hers. You'd looked it up before. There are no current inhabitants of the house.

The day of the official move-in was chilly. Wind howls across whispering leaves of young trees—planted after a fire broke out and destroyed a part of the town, according to your father. Despite how young they looked, the trees already had fat red blossoms hanging from their thin branches.

Your old street is nondescript, quiet. It curves around and away from the bigger streets, lending it an air of stillness. The only cars that come through are people living on this street. Your new neighbors wave hello, and they all have smiles set too red and shiny and big for their faces.

The new house stands tall and grand even as it is flanked by crumbling brick and sad, drooping plants. As you step from your car, the cold autumn wind cuts through your thin jacket. You turn your head to see the white house at the end of the street, squatting low in a yard overrun with brown tumbling weeds. You decide to tell your mother about the house's lack of inhabitants. She turns to where you're looking and her eyes sharpen, mouth turning down like she's telling a disobedient child to behave. Her head slowly turns back to look at you with keen eyes.

"That's fortunate," is all she says before shouldering the packed bags and heading inside.

Things are unpacked at a rapid pace until it seems that all at once, your brain stops referring to it as "your new house" and starts to refer to it as simply "your house." You spend most of the time taking care of your grandfather and going to your new school. Freya, your best friend that you left behind when your family moved, calls and you forget for a minute that a hundred thousand miles stretch between you and her, and all you know is her warm voice at the other end of the phone as her caramel thick laugh fills the room. When you hang up, the entire house seems to darken.

Your mother and father are both at your grandfather's house on the day you decide to go to your old house, leaving you alone so there's no one to stop you or give you a cautious look, like what they'd done every other time you'd brought up the topic of that old house. As you approach the house, you realize that it's a lot bigger than it looks. Despite its squat

appearance, the house sprawls like a limb casually thrown onto the ground. The rust-brown weeds growing on the lawn have spread since you first saw it and they cover the grounds in thick rivulets of scraggly growth. Yellow weeds sprout in wild golden abundance on the lawn. Upon closer inspection, you notice that the house seems to sag and tilt to one side like the head of a curious child. You tilt your head with it, mirroring its asymmetrical appearance. A low iron gate runs around it and you wonder briefly about its usefulness as you easily swing a leg over. You almost sneeze as a chill runs through your spine while you swing your other leg over and stand, not for the first time, within the embrace of a house you once called home.

The front door creaks. You distinctly remember the creak of your childhood home as a herald of your father or mother's return from work, a little noise of joy and reunion, of welcome and belonging. This creak is distorted and high and scratches at the ear in a jarring note of despair and warning. But you've always been too curious for your own good. The door hinges open and as you step over the threshold, I finally step inside.

There's an old, musty woody smell that's floating around the air. Tiny particles of dust dance into your vision, lit by the sparse beams of light that cut through the gray air. There's a mini foyer where the doorway is--a small open space that rounds out like a protruding belly, narrowing into a corridor leading to the living room, kitchen, and bathrooms. A layer of dust is everywhere: on the crumbling ashen walls, the squat wood cabinet built into the wall which used to have family photos displayed on it, the railing of the staircase, broken at the very end, a jagged piece of wood left naked and sharp. There is an acrid smell in the air, and you see charred pieces of wood peeling from the ceiling.

The creaky hardwood coughs up more dust as you gingerly step deeper into the house's maw. Not too late to turn back, a whisper comes from within your head, quick enough that you think it's your own. The thought is quickly pushed away. This was your childhood house after all, and whoever moved in after you obviously didn't take care of it as much as your family did. Some vindictive part of you wanted to see just how

badly the house had gotten to be ever since you left. After all, it had been your parents' idea to leave. Now, it was obvious that no one had been here in a long time. There were certain parts of the house that looked burnt, adding to its state of disrepair.

There's a tingling sensation in your hands. You aren't sure if it's from all that dust and god knows what else fumes you've been inhaling, or if it's from the excitement of exploring your old house. You've always had a penchant for sticking your nose into things that were better off left untouched. Wandering through the halls brings back childhood memories that had been long forgotten; as you dust off the cabinet where childhood pictures used to stand, it feels as if you're dusting off the haziness that has long covered your own memories of your own youth.

When you were younger, you had an imaginary friend. A lot of kids have imaginary friends, but yours was special. You knew how special she was because she had been by your side ever since you first met her, even when all your other friends left you. The first time you met your imaginary friend was when you were 6 years old. Her name was Sally and she appeared one day when you were playing with your blocks. That was before she became your friend. You were playing with your blocks and she kept on knocking them down. She was curious why you kept on picking them back up, stacking them up again, methodically, never complaining. The only time she ever succeeded in making you cry was when she stole your stuffed cat and hid it. You could never sleep without that damn cat. Your parents played along with your imagination with good humor until you were 13. At that point, you had become more and more withdrawn from your peers, quickly losing any other friends you had at school. You were more interested in spending time at home playing with Sally than you were in playing with your classmates. She always told such interesting stories, and pretending you were pirates or treasure hunters out for lost gold was much more fun than the gossiping that seemed to interest your other peers. Your parents would cast worried glances your way whenever they thought you weren't paying enough attention. You always paid attention.

When you were 14 years old, your family told you that they were moving. You promised Sally that you would come back, but after moving away to the city, you got lost in its bustle. All your life you'd been living in the same old house but the city opened up so much more to you. Sally was forgotten, a relic of your past. Even after three years, your parents still exchange glances of relief now, every single time you tell them that you'll be going out with friends. They think you don't notice, but you always notice.

You continue through the house, a film of dust and nostalgic memories clinging to you as you make your way to your bedroom. It's empty and bare, except for a small, full-length mirror hanging from the wall. There's a crack that runs down it, small spiderweb designs that emanate from one large circular crack, almost like someone punched it. The layer of dust on the mirror makes you appear as a hazy figure, flickering in and out of the light. On a whim, you use the sleeves of your sweater to wipe away the dust, coughing slightly as it enters your lungs and settles. No matter how much you hack and wheeze, the feeling that there's a layer of dirt and grime and age coating your insides won't go away.

When you finally catch your breath, something feels different. Your hands wave floppily in front of you, a parody of a greeting. This upsets you because you didn't mean to do that. You struggle to gain control of your body and as your eyes meet your own in the mirror, you finally *finally* see me. It turns out that you weren't the only one entering and exploring a place. Your eyes widen in horror as I finally settle in, use your lips to smile and your arms to raise the mirror from its place on the wall and smash it into pieces.

You left me behind, both in reality and in your memories. I waited so long for you to return, to keep your promise to me. The people who moved in after you were horrible. They moved everything, found our secret hideout in the attic, and destroyed it, making it into a supply closet. I tried to stop them, to warn them that they were destroying things precious to me and you. It was never my intention to hurt them. I didn't

know how fast a fire could spread and I had only meant to burn their supplies, clear out their invasive touch. It was...fascinating to watch them burn. No one would touch this place after hearing about what happened to them and I was happy. I set this place up for you, waiting for when you would finally return. It took you long enough though, didn't it?

Did you know that the day you moved away, I stole your stupid stuffed cat? I hid it under the bed. I wanted you to notice it was missing and come back and not leave me alone here. But you never did come back. Until today. And all it took was a small push. And now, you leave me with no other option. I can't trust that you'll ever come back here after today. So I have no choice but to come with you and make sure that we aren't separated ever again.



# A Quill for a Letter

## Willow Faust

In a refugee village, in a magical country, in a warring world, in a different time and space than ours stood a library. And in that library perched a raven-girl. Not a girl-raven, who we will meet later in this story, but a raven-girl. She was anguished with her own inner turmoil—her individuality that was too much of a singularity to be considered a positive thing. She was anguished with her raven-girlness. Not because all raven-girls are anguished beings—that would be reductive and stereotypical of me—but because she was a lonely raven-girl hiding away in a library, in a refugee village full of normal non-raven-girls, in a warring world for some incomprehensible political reason.

I say this as if there are other raven-girls in existence and perhaps she is just alone in this particular village. There are not. She is the only raven-girl in this warring world in a different time and space than ours, so perhaps I am wrong about raven-girls not being anguished beings. I apologize; all raven-girls are anguished beings, because she is anguished and she is the only one to exist.

You may now be wondering how she is a raven-girl. How she became a raven-girl is not the point of this story, nor very relevant, nor can be fully understood by someone in a world like ours because the happenings for her raven-girlness originate from a magical curse only possible in a world in a different time and space.

You may now be wondering why she is a raven-girl.

Why she was cursed to be a raven-girl for the rest of her life is also not the point of this story, nor very relevant, but certainly understandable by someone in a world like ours because we too share feelings of betrayal, and understand revenge, and understand hurting someone close to us by hurting what they love most. You see, the girl—before she became

a raven-girl—was the casualty of a feud beyond her control because her mother loved her. But that is not the point of this story.

You may now be wondering what the point of this story is.

The point is not how she became a raven-girl, or why she became a raven-girl, but it's about her and a library and what she does with her raven-girlness. And it's about a girl-raven, too.

The raven-girl hid in the library—less because she enjoyed the company of books and more because the library was one of the only places in her refugee village where she could breathe in the air of tranquility and solitude. At her children's home, with all the other refugee girls, loneliness built in her gut like she'd swallowed something she shouldn't have. She did not like them staring at her raven-girlness—her feathers and her white blonde hair. In the library, she could be alone without the heavy feeling deep in her body.

Her favorite spot was the reading nook in the back. But before she could get to the reading nook, she had to brave the battle of passing the librarian, who greeted her every time she came in. She was a small woman with limp brown hair who wore funky glasses on her long pointed nose. The raven-girl thought she had a face like a mouse. She didn't know her name, but thought of her as the librarian-mouse.

“Good to see you, Cora,” the librarian would say.

“Good afternoon, Cora!” the librarian would say.

“Let me know if I can help you find anything, Cora,” she said today.

The raven-girl never needed help with finding anything—she didn't want any books. All the things she wanted were outside of the librarian's expertise. Far beyond the library's realm of possibility.

She walked past the small and short bookshelves. This was the only library she had ever known, but she knew there were better ones out there. She overheard the librarian say things like “budget cuts” and “the war” and “short-staffed” and “rely on donations” and “limited funding”. Which meant, the raven-girl ventured, this library was nothing particularly grandiose. It was a no-nothing library in a no-nothing, beaten-down refugee town. But the raven-girl liked it anyhow, because it had that

nook. And in the nook there was a bookshelf with a ledge just the size of a young girl. And that ledge was the raven-girl's secret crying spot.

To get to the top of the bookshelf, she had to step on the top of the velvet green lounge chair. From there, she could plant her hands on the top of the bookshelf and hoist herself up. She couldn't even fly. Her legs were too human. She crawled to the end and then situated herself, pressing her raven-feather back against the wall. It gave her a birds-eye view of the entire empty reading nook.

The raven-girl ran her small fingers up the sleeve of her blouse, her finger pads coming into contact with her soft feathers along her upper arm. She pressed her fingers into her feathery skin, her eyes traveling across the library floor while her nails traveled along her skin. No one was here right now. It was quiet, and peaceful, and she felt lonely.

And then she yanked. Underneath all her feathers was normal human skin. She figured if she yanked enough over a certain amount of time, she'd eventually get rid of them all.

*Yank.*

Meanwhile, as I have promised, there is a girl-raven who was frequenting this library as well. Though, at this point in the story, girl-raven is an inaccuracy—a misnomer—because as she walked up the steps to the library, she was simply a girl named Agnes. Agnes was short and scrawny and had a face like a deer, her brother used to say. Her brother was bold and beautiful; she considered herself quiet and plain.

Unlike the raven-girl, Agnes did not live in the children's refugee home because she lived in a refugee shack with her quiet parents. Unlike the raven-girl, Agnes went to the library for the books because Agnes knew that anything you could ever want can be found in a book, even if the feeling was temporary and even if it was never exactly yours.

Like the raven-girl, Agnes's favorite spot in the library was also the reading nook. The first reason was because the bookshelves in the reading nook housed children's fantasy novels, which happened to be Agnes's favorite type of book to read. The second reason was because she loved that green velvet chair. It was perhaps the highlight of the entire library.

She passed the librarian, who gently said, "Let me know if I can help you find anything, Agnes."

Agnes waved and said thanks, but she knew what she wanted. She wanted a new book and a spot in the green velvet chair for the evening.

When she arrived at the reading nook, the first thing to catch her eye was not the green velvet chair or the rows of comforting library books, but something shiny and black at the top of the bookshelf. She squinted. She climbed on the chair. She reached and grabbed and almost cried out in astonishment when she realized the objects in her hands weren't objects, but were feathers from a real living being. Agnes stared down at the feathers in her palm. There were three of them there, reflecting light from the library lamps, giving them an iridescent blue shimmer. Their color reminded her of her brother's hair, shiny and black.

She thought for a moment where the feathers must've come from. She didn't come to any concrete conclusion, but she stuck all three in the pocket of her heavy winter coat to take home with her. "Home," if the word could even be used in this circumstance. Not if her brother wasn't there with them, and certainly not in this quiet refugee town. She supposed her old home no longer existed anymore. Was this her new home, then? Would her old, destroyed home be her only home for the rest of her life, with every one of her future residences just a house?

Agnes sighed, patted the feathers in her pocket, and scanned the bookshelves for her next read.

The following week, Agnes went back to the library. The librarian greeted her cheerfully like usual, despite the uncheerful circumstances—a winter snow had blown in, the war was still warring, and Agnes's parents had been awfully argumentative lately. Though Agnes supposed the librarian didn't know that last bit, so perhaps the librarian was equitably optimistic.

To Agnes's surprise, there were more feathers at the top of the bookshelf. She climbed up the chair and grabbed them all. Fistfuls! Agnes plopped onto the green velvet chair and counted the feathers, passing them from one hand to another as if she were counting money. *One...*

*two... four... eight... thirteen... seventeen... twenty-five!* Twenty-five feathers total in her lap. They varied in length, but none of them were longer than the length of her entire hand. *They're quite small*, Agnes observed. *They're soft*, she thought. The color of her brother's hair and eyes, shades stronger than her own features.

She wondered how the feathers got there. Perhaps a raven flew in and left them there. It was the only explanation Agnes could think of. Maybe the librarian had a magical raven familiar! (Of course, in this world in a different time and space than ours, magic was an authentic facet of life, much like science is one of ours. Agnes, being a young, imaginative, and quite moral girl had no desire—and hardly the facility—to conjure the idea that another young girl perched herself at the top of the bookshelf and ripped her cursed feathers from out of her skin. No. A magical raven familiar was much more exciting and reasonable to Agnes.)

Agnes looked up again at the bookshelf, as if she could scope out the source of the feathers. She pocketed all twenty-five and instead of perusing the children's fantasy shelves, Agnes went to the librarian's desk and asked if they had any books on corvids.

The next day, the raven-girl went to the library at her usual time—before dinner was served at the children's refugee home and after their afternoon snack. The roll of bread she ate stuck to her ribs. She was grateful they got a snack today. Sometimes there wasn't enough food to spare for a snack.

When she got to the bookshelf, she was perplexed to see all of her feathers missing. She had noticed a week ago a few of them were gone, but she had decided they must've fallen, or perhaps been cleaned up. Three missing feathers were unsuspecting. A great handful was suspicious. Her stomach curdled at the thought of someone stumbling upon her feathers. Her nails dug into her skin and she scrunched her face tight as she ripped a feather out, the pain pin-pricking and searing. She didn't really care that her feathers were gone. *Rip*. At least she didn't have to see that awful pile anymore. *Rip*. She thought about the way she shrugged

her coat over her body this morning and the way the other girls watched her snidely as she covered her feathers. *Rip*. She thought about the way they ate their bread rolls by pecking at it as if they themselves were birds. *Rip*. The raven-girl was glad she did not have a beak. But she wasn't sure it would've made a difference anyway. *Rip*. Soon she would have no feathers. Soon she would be a normal girl. *Rip*.

Usually, Agnes slipped off to the library once a week. But she went back the next day. She returned *The Big Book on Corvids* to the librarian before she skipped to the reading nook, astonished to see another pile of feathers already on the bookshelf. She had learned in her reading that ravens and crows molt, losing their feathers before winter so that strong ones grow in before the cold. Yet, it was winter already and she was unsure why a raven would be molting now.

Agnes pocketed all her new feathers. She went back to the librarian who sat at the front desk.

"Hello, Agnes. Anything I can help you with?"

"Yes," Agnes said. "Did you know there is a raven in the library?"

The librarian's face stilled in confusion, until the realization dawned. "Ah. I suppose you mean Cora."

"Cora?" Agnes asked.

"The raven-girl."

"The raven-girl?" Agnes asked.

"Another refugee girl," the librarian explained. "Part raven."

"Oh," Agnes said, as if this made sense. Of course, it did not really make sense. Cursed raven-girls were not common. Cursed raven-girls are the sort of thing to start an all-out war. They were the sort of thing to require unlawful, illegal magic.

"May I borrow some ink and paper?" Agnes asked.

The librarian handed over a well of ink and a small sheet. Agnes produced one of the feathers from her pocket, dipped it in the well, and scribbled a note just for the raven-girl.

She thanked the librarian and returned back to the reading nook, where she placed the note at the top of the bookshelf.

And now, she had an idea. And she raced off to pursue it.

The raven-girl felt especially glum the next day. She had noticed the small scabs at her arms where she'd plucked the feathers out. The blobs of bare skin peaked the rest of her dark feathers, like awful bald spots. She had thought she would be happier by now. But she felt ugly.

She thought about the other girls this morning, their hushed voices. *I bet her blood runs inky black.* (It did not run black, the raven-girl wanted to say. It ran red).

She was close to becoming a normal girl.

Except when she got to the bookshelf, she noticed something unusual. In place of her feathers sat a small sheet of cream paper. The raven-girl clobbered to her perch, picking up the note to read when she finally settled in.

*Dear raven-girl Cora,*

*My name is Agnes. I love your feathers. Forgive me for taking them. I hope you don't mind. Though I'm curious if they are from molting? I hope that is not an intrusive question. I don't know much about these things.*

*And look at this note. Don't you think it makes a beautiful quill?*

*Since you frequent the library as well, I suspect we would get along nicely.*

*Would you like to be friends?*

*Sincerely,*

*Agnes*

The raven-girl read it twice over. She did not know anyone named Agnes, so she guessed it must not be another girl from the refugee children's home. It explained where her feathers went.

The raven-girl hugged herself tight, fingers curling around a feather on each side of her arms. She counted down in her head (*three, two, one*) and yanked. Her eyes pricked with tears, but she was proud. Two feathers

down. Two more feathers for Agnes. Rip. *For you*, she thought, placing the feathers down on the bookshelf next to the note. *Take them.*

Agnes walked back from the library with a few more feathers in her pocket, a bit disappointed. The raven-girl had left more feathers, but hadn't responded to her note. Did that mean she did not wish to be friends? And what about the molting? But she considered the new feathers in her pocket a gift.

Agnes reached her temporary home, the small wooden shack.

"We're going to be leaving soon," her mother had said months ago. "We need to get to a safer country."

Agnes said hello to her mother who sat knitting a pair of gloves. She wasn't sure where she had gotten the yarn. Maybe she had taken apart a sweater or pair of socks, something that belonged to her brother. *He might need it*, Agnes thought, *once we find him again.* Agnes slipped into her room, a cozy little space with hardly enough room to breathe.

From under her bed, she dragged out her project. With today's feathers, she had enough to complete it.

A set of shimmery, blue-black raven wings.

Usually, the raven-girl waited for the other girls to leave their bedroom before she changed into her clothes. But today a group of them sat huddled together on one of their beds, giggling and laughing. She wasn't sure how they could be giggling and laughing when their breakfast was going to be stale bread and they lived in this awful home with a draft and there was a war going on with magic and weapons and politics.

So the raven-girl tried to dress as inconspicuously as she could, but as you can imagine, for a tall and lean raven-girl with shining black feathers and long white hair, it can be hard for one to be inconspicuous.

She heard their gasps before she saw how their eyes widened and scanned across her skin, like they were taking in each and every feather across her body.

The raven-girl quickly pulled her shirt and coat on, but it was too late. They saw the scabs and the blood and the bare spots and the patchy

feathers. They saw her ugliness and she heard it in their gasps. She heard it in their hushed whispers and the way they shuffled out of the room.

She had never felt uglier.

*I am sorry Agnes*, the raven-girl thought, sitting quietly on her bed, the tears welling in her eyes. *But I have no feathers to give you today. I am a bad friend.* She curled her legs to her chest, hugging them with her aching arms. *I am no-good as a normal girl. And now I'm uglier than ever.*

As I promised, Agnes—who has not been a girl-raven yet—is now the girl-raven in this story. Outside her small shack, Agnes affixed the wings to her arms. Snow had fallen the night before, leaving a perfect blanket of glistening white. The snow glimmered, and the feathers on her wings glimmered, and everything felt sparkly and right even though she had no home and her brother was gone—*lost*—and the war was still warring.

Agnes ran down the streets of the refugee town, hollering and yippee-ing. She waved her arms up and down as she dashed past the library and down the street. She jumped in the air, as if she could fly. She imagined soaring through the air, finding her brother safe and sound across the country. Maybe her feather quill-wings could write him a letter.

The magic didn't work like that. Flying from a pair of patchwork raven wings was not possible, not even in this magical country in a warring world in a different time and space than ours. But there was a different kind of magic in Agnes's rollicking.

The raven-girl pressed her face against the window of her bedroom in her refugee home, watching the girl-raven dashing past her street wearing her feathers. She saw the way the girl-raven swung her arms up and down like she was really truly flying through the snowed-in, run-down refugee streets. For a brief moment, embarrassment flickered up in the raven-girl's cheeks, because the girl wasn't really flying, not with those useless wings. But then she saw the smile on the girl-raven's face as she rounded the corner.

And the raven-girl realized she had a letter she needed to write—a letter signed Cora.

## Building 10 Women's Bathroom Maddie Stein



## Zoom University Adriana Dutra

A tangible love in an intangible virtuality  
Seems oddly unintelligible from swiping right  
on a feigned sort of fortitude turned rectangular  
Maybe you'll unmute and ask me out over Zoom  
Where the brilliancy of that HD resolution holds us there  
Crystallizing moments like oscillating pixels  
In the two-dimensionality we animate  
That could be reformatted into something we really feel  
So we seek on the explore page  
What we're out of touch with  
And we irreverently unfollow  
The erotic air outside  
Wait, do you speak python?  
Because I'm trying to read between the lines of your URL  
But maybe we're irreparably lost in translation  
Out of touch with the Californian virtual dream  
That fails to speak the language of love on the lips  
In favor of fingertips  
Though maybe we can live our lives on airplane mode  
And make our connection through disconnection –  
Just a futuristic maybe.

# One More Drink

## Janae Pabon

The neon pink and blue lights that line the walls cast a purplish glow on all of us. I know the bright colors are meant to simulate a club, a disco maybe, yet they fail to disguise the fact that this is just a campus bowling alley – one with only eight lanes. We claimed the seventh lane. It smells of greasy pizza, buttery popcorn, and the pitcher of cheap beer in the middle of our table; the scents mix as I wind my arm back, gripping the seven-pound ball tightly with my fingers. I step in front of me, and launch it forward. It slams to the floor with a clang that blends into the sound of other balls smacking pins around us.

“No!” I exclaim, throwing my arms into the air and turning away. The ball rolled halfway down the lane before falling into the left gutter.

Sanya laughs from the benches behind me, nearly spitting out the beer in her mouth as Landon calls, “Yo, when is Ben getting here? We can’t keep skipping over his turn for much longer, it’ll mess up the scores.”

\*\*\*

Ben. I knew he was different from any of the friends I’ve had since the first day I met him, when he transferred here for our second year of college. His stiff demeanor, the way he would shift his eyes away from yours when he was talking to you, the fidgeting with his shirt; he was a combination of awkward, yet also expressive and carefree. He was funny and I found I related to him in the important ways.

We had been lounging in the hammocks outside of my apartment complex last October, still relatively new friends, when I asked Ben what his favorite movie was.

He thought for a moment, then said, “The Godfather. Hands down.”

“Wow!” I said, sitting up to look at him, “Interesting choice. I couldn’t make it through that whole movie.”

“You?” He asked me back.

“Definitely Finding Dory.”

“Such a different movie from mine,” He laughed, “I love that one.”

“You know how I told you about that guy Jordan that I like?” Ben nodded, “We were talking about that movie two days ago and he said he hasn’t seen it. I told him how much I love it, and get this – he nodded and said ‘that’s cool’ and then that was the end of it.”

“Ouch,” Ben responded simply, using his hanging left foot to push his hammock into a swing.

“Isn’t that fucked up? I was obviously trying to get him to watch it with me.”

“Honestly Sophia, dudes are like that. It’s hard to read exactly what a girl wants. He was probably nervous.” He shifted in the hammock to his side, facing me as he swung back and forth, “My suggestion? Be straight up; bring up the movie again and just ask if he wants to watch it with you. If he doesn’t react well to that, he’s not worth your time. Trust me, it’s worth it to just know.”

I nodded, letting his words marinate in my brain. “You’re right,” I had said. “Hey, thanks for talking to me about this stuff. I appreciate that you’re always willing to give me advice on shit.”

“I got you,” he responded with a nod, “I feel the same. I still feel kinda weird talking to most people around here cause I’m not adjusted to moving yet. You’re one of my only friends that feels familiar.”

“Ewwwww,” I said sarcastically, and he reached over to punch me hard in the shoulder. “Ouch, fuck you!” I rubbed my pulsating shoulder blade.

“That’s payback for making fun of me while I’m being a vulnerable friend,” he said with a grin.

I laughed, my body swaying the hammock from side to side.

\*\*\*

That was last year, and once Ben started to loosen up around everyone, he began hanging out with Landon, Sanya, and I more. The three of us have been at the campus bowling alley tonight since 7:45. Ben was supposed to meet at the front like the rest of us, but he didn’t show – an

occurrence that has become more and more common recently. Though he rarely shows up on time now, the four of us have managed to go bowling three times this quarter. I'm still not getting any better at it.

I mope back to our table as the scoreboard on the old TV above us displays "o points!" and throw myself on the bench across from Landon in defeat, then sit up pour myself another glass from the pitcher.

Landon looks at me expectedly, waiting for me to somehow answer when Ben is getting here, when I know just as much as him. "I don't know," I respond with a sigh, sipping slowly, still hung up on my failed shot.

"I'll just go for him again," Sanya says, standing up and reaching for a ball.

I say nothing, and check my phone: 8:36 PM. I glance at the entrance one more time, scanning the group of students that just walked in, searching for an outlier likely in a Yankees cap; he's had it since he moved here from New York. The group shuffles to the shoe rental counter, revealing a grinning Ben behind them – predicted blue Yankees cap, Wu-Tang t-shirt, and all.

"There he is!" I say.

"Fucking finally," Sanya says, dropping her hand from the wind-up she was about to release, and walking back to place the ball on the ramp.

"What's up, guys?" Ben yells from the opposite side of the bowling alley, throwing his arms in the air and causing faces to turn towards him, then us. His lanyard and keys hang haphazardly from his jeans pocket and his shirt is stained with dark splotches. I raise my eyebrows, and Sanya waves.

As he gets closer, Landon says, "It's about time! We thought you weren't pulling up."

Ben cackles distinctly, and his entire body leans to the left before he steadies himself.

Wait... I pause for a moment. He looks drunk.

He reaches us and flops on the hard bench next to Landon, asking him about the score. Landon takes a big gulp of his beer and relays it to him.

I squint, surveying Ben's eyes. They're glossy. Then, there it is – the smell of whiskey and cologne.

"Why did you play for me?" Ben jokes to Sanya as he usually would, ending in a suppressed laugh and a light punch.

Landon is watching me with his eyebrows furrowed, and I lock eyes with him. I open my mouth to say something, he shakes his head ever so slightly, and I shut it.

\*\*\*

When the four of us first met last year at our apartment complex, it took some time before we became comfortable with each other. Landon, Sanya, and I became close pretty soon after, but even when our second week of hanging out together came to an end, Ben hadn't worked off his apprehensiveness yet. At least, not until we started drinking together that weekend.

"Another shot?" Ben had said a few hours into our hangout, already pouring Kirkland vodka into one of Landon's clear shot glasses.

"Oh god not for me," I had said, letting my head fall behind me onto the bean bag in Sanya's room, "I'm pretty drunk."

"Come on! It's Friday – none of us have classes tomorrow," he had insisted.

"Isn't that your seventh shot?" Sanya had asked skeptically from the other bean bag.

Ben had shrugged, and then proceeded to pick up the shot he poured, not answering Sanya's question. "Let's do this," he said to Landon.

"You're a beast," Landon had said with a laugh, cheersing his beer with Ben's shot, evoking a grin from Ben. They each drank.

Now, in the middle of the musty bowling alley, Landon isn't laughing. His frown is lit up pink by the neon lights, and he's gripping his cup tightly, shifting his eyes to Sanya – who's crossing her arms, standing next to me – and then back to Ben.

"I volunteered until you showed up. If you were going to show up," she says, mumbling the last part and ignoring Ben's joking tone.

"Well, the bowling king showed up – now watch this," Ben says, getting up and grabbing onto Landon's head for support.



“The fuck? Careful!” Landon says, trying to push Ben’s hand off his head as beer spills from the glass onto his shirt.

Ben needs the help – when he lets go, he stumbles to the right, barely catching his footing. He straightens his body upright, then reaches to grab a bowling ball.

“You’re welcome,” Landon mutters, crossing his arms and sitting farther into the corner of the plastic bench.

Sanya rubs her temples with her fingers, letting her head hang down, and says, “Okay, actually dude, maybe you shou-”

“I’m fine! I just got here, I wanna bowl,” Ben insists.

\*\*\*

Whenever we would show any concern, Ben would always try to tell us that he was fine. Last spring, the four of us had gotten together at Landon’s apartment while his other roommate was out of town, and Landon told us he wanted to invite two of his friends from class over to hang with us. After an hour of the four of us playing games and Ben being his usual drunk self, telling jokes that made us laugh until our stomachs hurt, the two friends showed up. They came inside and we all said our introductions over the music, offering them drinks while they joined our game, and Ben started to get quiet. Landon and his friend were playing FIFA on the TV later into the night and Sanya was leaned up against the dining table, asking Landon’s other friend where he was from, when I noticed Ben sitting alone on the couch in my peripheral vision. He was staring at the ping pong ball in his hand.

“I’m from New Jersey! East coast is the best coast,” Landon’s friend answered her with a playful push on the shoulder, and she giggled, leaning in close to him.

“Oh cool, Ben is also from the East Coast!” I piped up, gesturing to Ben, and Ben looked over when he heard his name. I knew Ben loved talking about New York and I anticipated his reaction of excitement.

“Oh yeah,” Ben said, cracking a smile.

“Where from?” Landon’s friend asked.

“New York.”

“Sick! I used to visit all the time.”

Ben nodded a couple of times, looked back down at his ping pong ball, and awkwardly walked over to the fridge. I saw Landon’s friend give a weird look to Sanya, who shrugged. My shoulders dropped and I sighed. Sanya and the friend kept talking while I watched Ben pour himself a shot, take it, pour another right after, and take that one too. He didn’t flinch. Ben caught me watching him drink, and I glanced away fast.

“God some curly fries would be perfect right now,” Sanya said to the group as her conversation died, and Landon agreed, his eyes still glued to the game on the TV.

Ben perked up from the kitchen. “I love curly fries,” he said, “let’s go to Jack in the Box.”

“It’s way too far to walk,” Landon said, and his friend next to him agreed.

“I’ll drive,” Ben said with a shrug.

“Oh nah, you’re not driving,” Landon replied, pausing the game and putting his controller to the side.

“Why the hell not?” Ben asked with a tone of aggression, “I’m fine and it’s like a five-minute drive.”

“You’re not driving,” Sanya reiterated.

Ben scoffed and walked over to his backpack on the floor. The silence pierced the air as he unzipped the front pocket of the bag and pulled out his keys.

The second he pulled them out, Sanya looked at me and I saw worry flash in her eyes. She rushed over to kneel down next to him. “Hey Ben, you’re good.” Her voice was softer this time. “No need to drive, I’ll Doordash us fries.”

“No, I want to.” Ben shot up, pushing her to the side with his elbow, and walked towards the door. “Who’s coming?”

Sanya glared after him, her hand instinctively moving to her shoulder where he bumped her, the sympathy leaving her eyes.

“No,” I said, rushing over to step in between Ben and the door, followed by Landon. “Ben, stop. We’re not playing around.”

Landon's two friends interrupted to tell us they were going to smoke behind the building, and awkwardly slipped out the door to leave the four of us alone.

Ben tried walking around me, but Landon grabbed his arm.

"Sit the fuck down," he said sternly, staring straight into Ben's face. Ben stood there for a moment, facing Landon, and I clenched my jaw, waiting. Then he backed down, walking to the couch with a scoff. The rest of the night, an uncomfortable tension clung to the air, and we all left Landon's early.

\*\*\*

I pull myself back into reality as Ben reaches for a bowling ball after assuring us that he's fine, and Landon sits on the plastic bench in silence, the corners of his mouth turned down. This time, he doesn't stand up and block Ben. I watch Ben hobble over to the line, swaying back and forth on the way. He winds it up and launches it. The ball is clearly too heavy for him because he lets go and nearly falls to the side before I, the closest, run up and break his fall with my arm. I feel the pool of sweat on his back the second I touch him.

"O-okay dude, you've got to sit down," I say. This feels too familiar.

Ben is usually a decent bowler, but this time the ball rolls directly into the gutter. He shouts and then turns towards me. "Why?" he asks a little too loudly, steadying himself.

I look back at Landon, whose lips are pulled tight, and his eyes scream with worry.

"You're clearly drunk. You said you wouldn't be fucking drunk," I hiss at Ben, getting angrier as I say it.

"What?" Ben says, glaring at me.

"Don't lie to me again." I cross my arms.

He rolls his eyes. "It was like one fucking drink, I can handle myself. I might as well have one more, you guys are the ones who bought a pitcher."

\*\*\*

One more. He had said that in my apartment the Tuesday he and I were doing homework together, long after we noticed Ben's drinking

habits getting worse, as he took his sixth beer out of the fridge. I was still sipping on my first and only can.

"What does it matter?" he had said, closing the door and cracking open the can.

"Because we're just doing homework on a Tuesday, why do you need a six pack?" I asked. The afternoon sun was filtering through the cheap plastic blinds of my apartment, shadows bouncing over the cans in the open fridge.

"Seriously, chill! Everyone drinks in college, why can't I enjoy a cold Pacifico? Plus, I hate studying."

I hesitated. "Ben, you've had at least three beers every time we've seen you for the past few weeks. I asked Landon and Sanya – they both said the same. I know you don't like people telling you what to do, but—"

"I'm fine. Don't treat me like a fucking kid!" He yelled at me, slamming the full can onto the counter and sending a wave of beer onto my wooden floor. I snapped my mouth shut. It was quiet, and all I heard was the pounding of my heart in my chest; I couldn't look at him. The drawn-out silence rang in my ears.

Finally, Ben dropped his shoulders and closed the fridge door behind him. "Okay I'm sorry, Sophia. Everyone just thinks I have an issue and it's annoying me. It feels like you're my parents or some shit."

\*\*\*

Standing in the middle of the shiny wooden lane, my ears begin to tune out the loud crashing of pins and the clang of bowling balls. Hearing Ben say he had "just one" makes my heart drop; I know he's lying. I should've known he would drink again. I let go of him now, nearly pushing him away from me, and walk back to our benches, sitting next to Sanya with my arms crossed.

"If he's gonna fuck up his life that's on him. We can't tell him what to do," Sanya says to me as I sit in silence.

I look up to connect with Landon's gaze again.

"It's not your fault, Sophia," Landon says, his expression softening.

"It's none of our faults," I say, and look back at Ben, who hasn't moved from his spot at the line. He clearly hasn't been listening because

he's scrolling on his phone, probably not noticing his body swaying back and forth, looking like a singular piece of seaweed in an empty ocean.

"This guy," is all Landon can say.

Then, as Ben tries to put his phone back in his pocket, his keys fall out and I watch them clang to the shiny wooden floor, shattering the mini snow globe keychain from New York that I gave him last Christmas, and I'm too slow to stop the slimy glitter mixture from splattering all over the floor under him. I feel a pang in my chest. He leans down, cussing, then slips and falls on his ass in the spill, his Yankees hat flying off his head to the floor. Now, everyone in the bowling alley is really looking. I notice a worker behind the shoe rental counter eyeing us.

\*\*\*

Ben hates cheesy things, which is exactly why I had gotten him that snow globe – plus he always tells me he misses New York. The four of us had been opening gifts in my apartment the first day back to school from winter break. I had returned from my New York vacation the day before, and I was nearly bouncing up and down while I waited for Ben to open his gift from me. The globe was a few inches wide, and the plastic bottom was bright blue. A tiny empire state building stood in the middle, covered in a sheet of fake white snow; the glitter floating around when you shook it resembled a snowy day in New York. It made Ben let out his signature cackle when he opened it in front of the three of us, and he told me he loved it. It was clunky for a keychain, but Ben attached it to his keys anyways. I had felt warm, sitting there in my apartment with the three of my best friends, green and red wrapping paper strewn around us on the carpeted floor. That was before he started drinking daily. Before he grew a beer belly and before he stopped going to his classes.

\*\*\*

Now, that globe is in pieces on the floor of the bowling alley.

"Really, Ben?" I say.

"Sorry," he slurs. He doesn't say anything else.

"He just slipped guys, sorry! Can we get some napkins?" Landon says to the viewers of the scene. Sanya glares at Landon, grabbing the napkins

we already had on the table and shoving them into his hands. "Never mind..." he trails off.

"Shut up, Landon," Ben yells back at him, his eyes shifting from one stranger staring at us to the next.

The employee giving us the eye, clearly a college student getting paid less than minimum wage, starts walking over to our table.

"Oh boy," I mutter.

"Is everything alright here? Are you going to stop causing trouble if I let you stay, or am I going to have to kick you out?" He asks.

"We're perfectly fine, thank you. We'll clean up the spill on our own," Sanya replies.

"Sorry about this," I say, and the employee rolls his eyes.

"No more pitchers for y'all," he mumbles as he walks away.

I look back at Ben. His face is bright red, and he won't make eye contact with me. I sigh, walk over to him, and lean down. He's still sitting in the small puddle of goop, the glitter from the shattered globe making his pants shimmer in the pink light. I pick up his Yankees hat and hand it to him, and then grab his arm, trying to help him up. "You promised us you wouldn't drink anymore, Ben." I'm almost pleading to him, as if I want him to say he was faking it and is still sticking to his word.

"Why do I need to stop drinking, huh?" His words blend together at the ends. "All of you are drinking."

I pause for a moment, glancing back at the almost empty pitcher the three of us shared tonight. It sits innocently on the dark wooden table. "Because" I say, looking down at Ben, "you get too drunk too often. You don't get it, you're..."

"I'm what?" he spits the words at me.

"You're an alcoholic."

I've been thinking those words for months, but never said them out loud. Ben scoffs and looks to Sanya and Landon who are silent, then back at me. "Don't act like I never carried you up the stairs to your apartment. Don't act like I've never held you over a trash can."

I don't know what to say in response to that.

"You're just as bad as me."

The words sting and I can't look at him, or my friends. Ben shakes his head and starts trying to brush the glitter off his pants, and I still can't move. I just stare at the thin layer of foam bubbling down in the tall plastic pitcher.

Three lanes over someone strikes down all ten pins, and the CRASH echoes in my ears. Their team cheers, their picture-perfect celebration impaling me through the gut.

## About Annie Elizabeth Brown

Annie has tattoos in places  
Her parents will never see.  
An angel number on her hip,  
A cluster of tiny stars, like little flying sparks,  
That makes her feel free.  
She says she traded her cigarettes for weed,  
But open her nightstand drawer  
And you'll see  
That she never really broke up with nicotine.  
Annie looks for love everywhere,  
Around every corner of every street.  
She writes her love wishes down  
In her journal before she sleeps,  
And hoping they'll come true,  
Hands out pieces of her heart, little valentines,  
Like the paper scraps pasted in her journal,  
Her candid photos,  
Her movie tickets,  
Her old magazine clippings.  
When you're up in her room  
She reveals her strange little habit  
Of complimenting the curl in your hair  
As she sits before the mirror  
Blithely flattening her own.  
Both her hands are museums of jewels,  
Jewels and stones,  
Metallic, ancient-looking things  
Stacked on her fingers,  
All crowded with rings.  
Her eyes are jade disks with ripples of tawny  
And the skin that surrounds them,  
Always darkened and bold—  
Feline, Cleopatra-like—  
As if lined with smooth, creamy coal.  
But you never could imitate her,  
No matter how hard you tried

Because on your own face,  
 That darkness never looked the same.  
 When you're with her  
 Life is a carnival ride,  
 And time that imperceptible force  
 Making the carousel  
 Merrily go round.  
 All of a sudden, then,  
 The whole world slows down again  
 When you part,  
 And she leaves you without a message,  
 Without a word,  
 Not even a signal,  
 Nothing but wide-open silence  
 That lingers for weeks.  
 But soon the machine starts to turn again,  
 The ground begins to shift beneath your feet,  
 When she needs you to listen  
 Because she knows  
 That you'll always let her speak.  
 It's the key to her survival,  
 Part of the way she lives and breathes,  
 And so it's only natural  
 That her heart can't help but make promises  
 Her head will never keep.  
 You're cool in her presence,  
 Chill to the touch, but gleaming and special,  
 Like a precious stone.  
 But when this chillness turns against you  
 And her static silence infects you with its disease,  
 You enter another cynical, critical state,  
 And feel used, unimportant, alone.  
 Annie inflicts all these feelings,  
 It's true—you're not incorrect.  
 But under all her impulsivity,  
 Beneath her countless contradictions,  
 Her common chaos, her emotional neglect,  
 There's still one thing, for sure, you'll always know:  
 She'll never forget to tell her little brother she loves him  
 Before she hangs up the phone.

## Brothers

### Noah Ackerman

The dying sunlight seeps through the window into the living room, blending into the tv's flashing lights. Sounds of buttons mashing and light-hearted music spread throughout the seemingly empty house.

Michael and Benjamin hunch over their controls in the ever-increasing dark lair. Benjamin sits on a dark purple couch opposite of Michael, who occupies the longer one, his stretched-out body eclipsing the couch's color. Benjamin's face, like Michael's, is locked onto the screen. Taking inspiration from Animal Crossing, the map's background is filled with recognizable characters spectating the fight behind a light brown fence.

Benjamin's lips tighten as he moves Donkey Kong across the map towards Link, who is shooting arrow after arrow from the map's grassy ledge. Michael spams the "shoot" button in a panic before finally deciding to jump off the map to avoid Benjamin's grab move. It doesn't work. Donkey takes Link with both hands and throws him down, causing him to go off screen and lose a life.

"Dammit!" Michael says, slapping his palm on his thigh several times. His controller flies out of his hand and ricochets off the tv stand a few yards away, almost knocking down a framed photo of the two holding skis in front of a snow-capped cabin. "I fucking hate that Donkey can do that. Way too overpowered."

"Yeah," Benjamin replies, giving a sympathetic nod. "Maybe switch up the strategy."

"What do you mean?" Michael says, picking up his controller off the ground.

"Isn't it obvious? You're heading straight to the edge the second we start and you spam projectiles. That's not going to stop Donkey, or any melee fighter. Well, if they're good. You're getting eliminated so much

faster that way.” Benjamin shifts his body on the couch so that he’s facing Michael.

“Yeah, I don’t agree, to be honest. If I don’t sit on the edge, how am I supposed to use my arrows and bombs? Hell, how can I use my shield if I’m constantly being attacked by someone behind me? The strategy works, trust me. Or, you know, we could just rematch.”

Michael plunges a hand into a Ruffles bag on the floor and pulls out some crumbs. He licks them off his palm and tosses the bag onto the coffee table, another collection to the rainbow sea of wrappers, plastic bottles, and other forms of trash. Benjamin pretends to not notice him picking up the controller without wiping his hands. There’s been a lot of things about Michael recently that Benjamin pretends not to notice. But how does one even begin to confront them? Right behind Benjamin’s mind lies a steep, towering slope. Any attempt to climb it must be done in precision; one wrong step and the avalanche will surely bear down on him.

“You weren’t always using the edge,” Benjamin says. He turns his eyes to the TV and starts another match. “Do you remember last year in the dorms?”

“Not much. It’s all a blur to be honest, except for pledging.” His eyes are glued to the screen as Donkey and Link land on the stage.

“I do. You would play Link every single match. I remember you winning all the time. There was this one time that Jason got super pissed because you—”

“Fuck!”

Benjamin jumps as Michael bounds off the alcohol-stained couch. His player is flung to the bottom of the map by Donkey — again. He sits in front of the TV, hunched over his chipped controller. Benjamin notices that Michael’s hands have started to shake.

Benjamin is silent for a minute. He grabs his dab pen and takes a long hit, the cloud diffusing across the living room littered with sneakers, stolen street signs, and Coors Banquet cans. Shivering, he drapes himself in a blanket that hasn’t been washed in six months and lays down on the couch.

As he continues to attack Link, his mind slips back to a couple years back, when Mike and him did many more things together besides the occasional gaming marathon. In his heart, he genuinely believes that he couldn’t have been assigned to a better roommate. It was more than the frequent trips to the mountains and the countless movie nights. He felt like he was finally heard from someone after so many years of changing towns and schools. More importantly, he felt love — genuine, pure love. Everything between them was in sync. But that was then. He knows that that version of Michael, the real version, is still here. It’s just that those moments have grown increasingly rare.

Michael moves Link to the left side of the map. His sunken eyes shimmer with hope as he mashes the buttons. A loud explosion comes from the tv, followed by the announcer saying “game”. He lets out a heavy sigh and hangs his head. “I don’t know why I keep playing this game anymore. Jack can beat the whole fraternity with Link using the edge.”

“Maybe you should stop doing whatever Jack does,” Benjamin says, staring at the back of Michael’s head. “You’re getting worse and worse each day. I just might have to call someone over to get you back on track. Mikey, you’re losing the ‘touch’.”

“Aah, fuck you, dude,” Michael laughs. Benjamin is silent; his face is grave. Michael’s phone dings with a notification. He checks it, sends a quick reply, and stands up.

“Speaking of Jack, he wants me to hang with some of the brothers at his place. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

Michael walks down the hallway into his and Benjamin’s room. Benjamin tries not to hear the loud snort coming from their room, but the sardine can-like house makes that impossible.

“See ya, Benny boy,” Michael says as he walks out the door, wearing a completely different outfit than before. His upper lip has a pink shimmer to it, as if his nose was bleeding moments ago.

As Michael steps out of the door, Benjamin notices a white stain on his black Adidas sweatpants.

“Later Mike,” Benjamin says. He watches the grey Subaru back out of the driveway until he is out of view. “Be careful on the edge.”

## nike Chloe Keely

i loved her endlessly.  
there are rotten and disgusting spots on my soul and i adored her  
for planting each and  
every one of them.  
i rose to kill her each morning and she slipped the sword from my  
hand into hers  
whispering a subtle promise  
ascension  
to the realm that only she could unlock  
for me  
and i rose to her.

competition opened her arms to me and i opened mine wider  
hoping the winds would catch my waxen wings to lift me higher  
and higher and higher  
and higher than her. but she rose with me,  
unrelenting and restless  
with greens thorns woven into her wild cesspool of hair.  
she extended an olive-skinned hand to lift  
me to her but i slipped  
out of her grasp and fell.

i always fall harder.  
in the breaths between our consolations,  
i would look to the sky and find her. she taunted me  
from star to star,  
guiding me from brighter to brightest until  
i was blinded  
by the rising sun she sat on.  
i wanted to pluck her from the sky and squash her.

resolute, i rose with a start and  
she would smile at me.  
and i would forget how to  
hate her again.

# Fall of the Flaky Pastry Facade

## Anna Madrugá

Matteo arrived at one of the most prestigious pastry schools in Paris, Le Cordon Bleu, with a desire to make desserts so amazing that even his parents would be impressed. The classes, all in French—a language Matteo was somewhat less than fluent in—all revolved around niche subjects like “General Pastry Arts,” “The Science of Custard,” and “Pastry History.”

Matteo was quickly falling behind his classmates, many of whom were from well-known pastry families and had been baking at a high level since they were old enough to hold a spoon.

Among this sea of pretentious French chefs, one stood above the rest: Jean-Clément Lyon, the heir to the Lyon bakery dynasty, the pride of Paris. According to all of the professors, Jean-Clément was the most talented pastry chef in his generation. And he was treated as such by the crowds of mediocre students that kissed his ass constantly, hoping for some of his genius to rub off on them.

Matteo and his roommate Claude were the only two in their class who openly despised Jean-Clément, making them social outcasts who were openly mocked for their treasonous dislike of the school’s unofficial king. Ever since their first peer pastry review, Matteo had despised Jean-Clément. He had taken one tiny nibble of Matteo’s first-ever attempt at a traditional custard tart and had curled his mouth up in disgust, like the tart had been filled with dog shit, before loudly announcing to the class that this was the most horrible pastry he had ever eaten. After a long pompous monologue about how a REAL custard tart should taste, Matteo’s vague disdain had officially matured into a full-blown vendetta—he vowed to knock Jean-Clément off his high horse before the semester was over.

Claude, by nature much more timid and reserved than his roommate, was more than willing to be a silent member of their “rebel alliance,” but was stubbornly against the idea of actually speaking out or sabotaging Jean-Clément in any way. He feared that the repercussions would be overwhelming—he had resigned to weather a few years of living within the Jean-Clément fan club.

When Matteo entered the General Pastry Arts classroom one Tuesday, each cooking station had a single croissant waiting for them—it was yet another peer pastry review day. Matteo knew based on the lustrous shine and perfect flake of the pastry that he had gotten Jean-Clément’s work. This was the exact moment he had been waiting for since his humiliation at the beginning of the semester. His classmates stared daggers at him—jealous they hadn’t been chosen to make contact with Jean-Clément through his pastry.

“Don’t do it, Matteo” Claude whispered, his voice shaking, “It’s not worth it, they’ll hate you—well, us—forever.”

Matteo ignored his friend, his eyes glazed over with a sense of purpose and intensity. He was ready to tear down the king.

“Ok, Matteo, it’s your turn now,” said their ancient professor, a man rumored to have made pastry for Winston Churchill during WWII. “Take a bite of your assigned pastry and critique it fairly, please.”

Matteo nodded politely and eagerly picked up the croissant. All eyes were on him as he raised the flawless creation to his mouth and bit down, sending shards of flaky pastry cascading down his pristine chef jacket. The room held its breath as Matteo chewed, his face fixed in a mask of contemplation, giving no indication of how it tasted.

“I have some thoughts,” Matteo said carefully, placing the pastry back onto its bench. “This croissant...Well frankly, it’s average at best.” The class gasped, in awe that anyone, even Matteo, would dare speak against Jean-Clément’s talent.

He continued as if he hadn’t heard their shock, basking in the attention. “Yeah I mean it’s definitely good, but I’ve had better. Hell, even Claude can do better than this.”



## Wisteria Sydney Lehr

At the mention of his name, Claude looked like he was about to cry, his body almost melting inwards to minimize the embarrassment. Matteo kept speaking out to the class, as he walked around his workstation and made his way toward the front of the class. He reached the front of the room and raised his arms.

“We all know Jean-Clément made this croissant. But honestly, guys—it’s just a fucking croissant, we can all make one, so why should I pretend like this one is any better than the others?” Matteo turned back to lock eyes with the professor, and saw that his mouth was hanging open—this was probably the most shocking thing that had happened to this sad baker since the Blitz.

“This croissant was not made by a god, it was made by a man,” Matteo continued, emboldened by the stares of disbelief around him. “And that man is nothing special.”

About half the class was filming him on their phones—surely to show Jean-Clément later—and Matteo knew he had made his point. He had taken a stand against the king.

Spring’s sweetness fades all too quick  
In oppressive heat, the flower draws its final breath  
And drops its petals, one by one  
Coating the ground in summer’s snow

# Sognare

## Jenna Dierkes

Giulietta  
Vicolo Santa Cecilia 9, 37121  
Verona – Italia

Dear Juliet,

I no longer live on Castello Road, but if it awaits you now, be prepared for the journey ahead. Once you step out for the first time and the world seeks to claim you as theirs, you mustn't lose yourself. After the departure from home, soldiers and aliens alike confront the societal indignity of becoming one's own. A catalyst that sinks the stomach, all while proceeding with a customary disguise in the conventional. This is where you'll understand what it means to be truly alone.

Suddenly you'll be far away, nothing stopping you from doing the things you want to do. It will be then, and only then, that you'll crave the guidance you ever so wished to have strayed from. Childhood ignorance will be clouded with nightmares. Dreams lost within those first months gone, soaked into tear-stained pillow cases.

Desperate wanderings of this foreign town are expected to be your new refuge.

Witness those presumed dead; how they fell ill of the fostering guilt and complaisant medley of the mind. Inside this fever dream lies the utter draw to the hum. Vacillation, trepidation, illumination: it all whirs throughout the states of matter circling around in these brick walls, transferring energy to one another and acting as if we are unchaperoned by the winds of change.

But here is where love is found. The type of love you have been longing for your entire life, and you are not really sure that it is supposed to be

happening to you at all. A love that equals how your beauty expands upon the necks of wildness that naturally occur within, and once more, the waves fall onto the shore-ridden white flowers of the land.

Embrace this. Grasp the naturally welded rocks in your hand that seep through the flexion creases and ignite the stolen solace through your blue veins. Look up at the occasional red-tailed hawk that someone sends as a message to clear the paths of uncertainty; it soothes all cries. Smell the orange lilies that are savored beside the ink on the recycled paper that continues to kindle the heart. And don't forget about the deliveries from Mendl's that present an abundance of kinship alliances and sugar to remind the sweetness of life where it stands: in the eyes of the beholder.

To be released free from the cage of ego, there is a constant effort to be made in solitude. The fires of sufferance and waters of pleasure demand acceptance. Spiders and grasslands and fledglings joined in the navel-gazing offer guidance into the abyss of the mind, to create the reality of one existence. That's when your dreams finally find their way to you once again – as if they were waiting for you all along.

Onward is the only way forward. And onward you must go.

## Garden Spray Bottle Alexandra Hardcastle



## Mandy Joshua Venz

*Hello Nero,  
Congratulations on being chosen to move forward with the hiring process. An official interview will be held tomorrow, Friday 3/14 at 8AM . If you are selected, a follow up will be held at 8AM on Saturday 3/15. We are looking forward to speaking with you!*

Nero always tended the pots at night. His mornings were too busy, afternoons too light. His free time was allocated completely for his plants. He needed them as much as they did him, a symbiotic, paternal relationship. Six pots crowded on his patio were all he had from the garden far away. Tonight was the eve of spring and the prologue of a storm clung to the air. Even now the blooms of his world shone: bright-blue lupine, vibrant daffodils, fiery nasturtiums, a palette in the window-light.

Despite the coming rain, he watered each pot. Not too heavy on the poppies, the alyssums needed to be showered. Watering was a sensitive act, every plant had a need and likewise a limit. Once complete, he found himself cradling the smallest signs of infant buds, imagining each and every colorful future. Amidst his admiration, a mewing caught his ears.

He turned to find a small orange cat sauntering in through the fence. It stared at him, indigo irises wide. He offered his knuckles before the cat; its wet nose drew up and down in a survey. A moment later it brushed its neck into his arm and arched its back into his leg.

“Do you like the garden?” he asked.

It mewed in response, flopping to the ground in a lengthy half-moon stretch. He scratched its back, feeling about for any sign of an owner; its fur as soft and delicate as poppy petals. The cat had no collar and before he could think of a name it bolted. His girlfriend Shay was standing in the doorway to the slider, her arms crossed. He checked his phone,

11:58 PM

Thursday, March 13th

and conceded, heading inside to prepare for his morning interview.

The apartment was dark, lit only by the stove hood's yellowing lights. As Shay's silhouette disappeared, he found the dusty box below the couch. He fished his good shoes from the sea of ties inside, and placed them by his coat in the entryway. Upon the coat sat his newest tie, still choked in shrinkwrap. It was olive green, the fifth one Shay had gifted him this year.

Every gift was a tie now. Their relationship had been cast into doldrums, their interactions always taking place in the darkest parts of the day. Three years in and they were rootbound, he had never expected decay to happen for a reason beyond either of their control. Moving to turn off the stove light, his eyes fell upon a shiny pamphlet sat at Shay's place on the table, an unignorable position.

#### New Homes in Villa Vista for Sale!

White gleaming townhouses sat orderly on a street lined with invasive trees. On the back of the ad, a couple beaming with mannequin smiles stared through him. Shay wanted to transplant them, believing a new start would salvage them. Nero longed for a solution, but knew that moving was the furthest thing from an answer. The truth was more nebulous. Tossing the pamphlet into the trash, he decided to save the dishes for tomorrow.

-

It was raining when he left campus the next afternoon: he ran out into the cold. He had not found the time to change out of his formal attire from the interview in the morning, Friday's were a barrage of TA-ing, work in the research lab and classes.

The rain was gentle, but consistent enough to put a squeak into his shoes. Barry Manilow sang a rich ballad in his headphones, a duet with the melody of the raindrops. With the weather he wouldn't have to water;

he would fertilize instead. The nasturtiums like nitrogen, the alyssums need acid, the lyrics sang You know I can't smile without you—

A car horn roared and a splash slapped him. The curses of the driver faded into the growing storm as quickly as he crossed the street. People drove too fast on this road now. The street signs had been recently amended ten higher than they were.

In his approach to his apartment, he noticed a window ajar, Shay's window. The screen was angled, thrashing. Nero pushed through thorny bushes to adjust it and after securement, a new dripping from deeper inside caught his ear.

En-route to the front he grabbed the bucket and followed the marching drum of drips to the skylight. A column of water streamed in from a loose corner. Shoving the bucket under the deluge, Nero made his way to the closet when his phone rang. He checked the caller,

Dad

not now.

He answered, opening the closet in time for it to purge its contents onto the floor.

"Can you hear me?" his dad asked.

He fidgeted with his phone until he found the flashlight.

"Yeah I'm here dad," he said. Even after shedding, the junk in the closet was thick as mud. "Actually now's not really—"

"Did you get my email about the commencement? We'll be coming up next Friday," his dad said, louder.

Finding the tape, he dislodged the roll from the clutter.

"Yeah I did," he mumbled. "You didn't have to come."

"Nero, this is a celebration of you getting a Master's Degree, that opportunity doesn't come around more than once in a lifetime." Nero tuned out the tangents about his degree: it was two years he had not needed, it was only ever supposed to be a gamble at more time. He didn't want the degree, he didn't want the interview, or the position, all he wanted to do was—

The bucket below the leak was overflowing. He emptied the bucket into the kitchen sink, a majority rebounding back onto the tile. Bucket returned, he placed a wobbly chair below the skylight. With the rate his dad spoke, the degree may as well have been his own.

“You should be proud of yourself. You’ve gotten so much further than I ever did. Wasn’t

your interview today? The good one?” his dad said.

“I don’t like that company, I’d only be doing it for the salary, which isn’t even that good.

Can we talk about something else right now dad?” he said through bitten teeth.

“Okay then. How’s Shay?” his dad asked.

He regretted changing the subject.

“She’s fine, we’re kinda in a lull right now, it’ll pass,” he said, trying to align the patch, the chair rattling. “We only see each other in passing these days, with my research and her hours it is rare for us to have time.”

“That busy huh? You two haven’t visited at all this year,” his dad said.

His hand slipped and the tape stuck to the ceiling. He tore it off, a layer of paint too. “I know, I’m sorry. I promise I’ll visit soon,” he said.

“When you get that job Nero you’ll have even less time, trust me. You only have so much time in your life, you gotta balance your responsibilities. Eight to five is very different from—”

“I know dad. I really don’t want to think about this job or anything right now. I just didn’t expect this day to arrive so fast—” he said, slamming the tape into the leak. The force ejected the chair and sent him falling to the tile.

“Nero are you okay?” his dad asked.

He gazed up at the skylight, covered with leaves, muddled.

“Yeah,” he wheezed. “I’m sorry dad. Let’s just call another time?”

There was a pause, the leak was quiet. The vomit of the closet, scattered upon the floor, had soaked up the lake on the tile.

“Okay. I love you Nero,” his dad said.

“Love you too,” he said, standing up, dripping. The call ended, the rains’ tempo doubled.

Down the hall his eyes caught the glint of rain floating through the window he had forgotten to shut. He closed it, bumping into Shay’s nightstand. The bowls, plates and glasses which covered the entirety of its surface clattered: perhaps the rain had cleaned them for him.

His eyes wandered outside, the mess could wait.

Nero walked out onto the patio, he needed to fertilize. So he collected his tools from a sun-bleached tupperware, a pungent aroma hitting his cold nose. He remembered home.

The garden there was massive: fruit trees, raised beds, wildflower lawns. His father had taught him to garden, he had taken Nero to nurseries every summer since he was five. They would pick out seedlings and spend all day planting them.

All he had now was a remnant, old plastic cups, cracked pots. The years of work and commitments had eroded his time away. He never asked his father to visit here, it would break his heart to see so little.

The task of fertilizing went by too quickly. He paused for a moment, hair slick, shoes muddy, nails darkened: waiting.

To his delight, a meow reached his ears. He was overjoyed. His friend stood at the edge of the roof for a moment, tiny streams of water falling from its whiskers, before disappearing.

Nero, balancing precariously on the fence, managed to pull himself up to follow it onto the small shelf pooling with water. The cat sat staring out at the road he walked to campus on. He sat beside it, suit a shade darker, feet entombed in spongy socks. He didn’t much care, they would dry.

The cat glanced at him before falling to its side, rolling about in the puddles to expose its belly. He brushed his numbing fingers along its fur, feeling the subtle vibrations of its purrs, it was surprisingly warm.

“You really like the water don’t you?” he said. It rolled again reaching out with its pulsating claws.

“We need to give you a name don’t we?” he said. The cat turned, purred louder, and tilted its head. He grabbed a small stick and wiggled it. The cat batted playfully.

“I wish I could stay up here,” he said, his eyes falling through the skylight to the dim space below. “But I have something special to do tonight little man.”

It meowed in protest.

“I know. But I need to do this for her and me,” he said.

Nero had attempted this type of gesture for Shay before. Sometimes effective, sometimes not, it was his way of trying to sustain them amidst the doldrums they had drifted into. He preferred the intimacy of their kitchen. While small, it was far more comforting than Manassero.

The cat watched him think. It gave him a cursory huff, before it leapt from the roof and strutted out into the rain. Nero sighed, removed detritus from the gutter, and re-entered the apartment.

-

Hours later, the closet was stuffed, the floor was dry, and his suit hung crumpled in the bathroom. Dinner was prepared an hour ago, he checked his phone,

9:29 PM

Friday, March 14th

and waited.

Shay’s nights had been running later and later the preceding days, but never to this degree. He leaned against the counter, snacking on the remnants of vegetables in the pan awaiting a wash. When he heard the lock rattling, he began plating the meal and adjusting the candles beside an arrangement of poppies from his garden. Shay rounded the corner with a vacant face.

“We could have gone to Manassero if you wanted dinner,” she said.

“We go to Manassero every weekend. When was the last time we sat down here to eat together?” he asked.

“I’ll be back in a sec,” she said.

“The food is hot, just relax for a minute,” he replied.

Shay turned her back. “I’m just going to wash up.”

He fidgeted with the table setting before consigning himself to his seat. By the time she returned the kitchen smelled like dishes more than dinner.

“Are those flowers from outside?” she asked between bites of food.

“Yes,” he replied.

She talked to him as if he were a stranger. The wake of their three years together was nonexistent.

“Hm,” she murmured, “Well you tracked mud in the house.”

His good shoes sat in the entryway, a penny-sized speck of mud right beside the sole.

“How did work go today?” he asked.

“Good,” she paused, “Nothing new. A couple rude clients, for some reason it’s always Friday’s when people are asses, no patience at all.”

“Well I wanted to talk about—”

“Oh yeah,” she interrupted. “How did your interview go today?”

He looked at his plate: two hours to prepare and she treated it like nothing.

“It rained afterwards, so that was nice,” he said “But I think this one might be it.”

Her eyes awoke.

“Nero, that’s great. We need this. When will you hear?”

“There’s a follow-up tomorrow, I’ll know after that.”

“That’s great,” she said. “When you get this we’ll have enough to move to Villa Vista.”

Nero’s eyes fell to the garbage where the pamphlet sat covered in trimmings and peels.

“Shay, even if I get this job we’ll barely be able to finance it, especially since we go to Manassero every week,” he said.

She put her utensils down.

“If you get the job? When you get the job and we move together, everything will be so much better. We’ll have more space, more privacy, a shorter commute,” she said.

“You drive fifteen minutes to work.”

“On a crowded street,” she said.

“I walk thirty minutes to campus every day.”

“Oh don’t give me this now Nero, you’ve never once asked to take the car. And what’s the matter with Villa Vista, this has been our plan since year one? You promised me this apartment was temporary, that was three years ago and I’m tired of it. If we can afford better, why not take it?” she said.

He met her gaze now, her face blooming with contempt.

“Villa Vista doesn’t even have a patio,” he said. It wasn’t just that however.

“So what? We don’t even use the patio here, it’s a waste of space. We wouldn’t lose a thing,” she said.

He was a stranger to her, that cemented it. He clasped his hands together beneath the table, eyes fixated upon the wilting flowers he had cut for her which sat between them.

“We would be risking a lot with that rent,” he said.

“It’s always money with you. You promised me that you’d get a real job after your degree, one that could help us. Now you’re blaming me for our situation?” she said standing up.

“That’s what all this was for huh? To try and make me feel appreciated before you fucking blame me for everything? How could you?”

“Shay, that’s not what this was about. We don’t ever spend time together, I wanted to do something for us. Moving isn’t going to bring us back. We have to do it Shay.”

“I have a headache, and I’m tired of whatever this is,” she said.

Grabbing her plate she vanished, yet she had left the table hours ago. They were miles away from each other even in the same room, it made him feel sick. He blew out the candles, and carried his plate to the stack of dishes.

“Why are my pillows wet Nero!?” Shay’s voice rang from the bedroom. She must have forgotten that she had left her window open. The door slammed, the pull of her frustration was powerful. His heart raced, he hated this feeling. He felt helpless, the interview was tomorrow, he had a chance to do something, to—

A faint mewing caught his ears.

In mere moments he found himself outside in the mist with a small pan of milk. There in the light was his little friend, sitting proudly between nasturtiums and sundrops, adding its own oranges to the patio’s palette. He brushed his hand between upright ears and all the way down its damp back.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

As he placed the dish it rushed forward and lapped the milk up in seconds. After the dish was clean, it moved to beside his knees, resting its cold head on his thigh, eyes squinting.

“I should have stayed up on the roof with you, I know. I was trying to do something nice for her, we’re so distant now. We can’t talk about anything, I’m adrift. I don’t want this job, I don’t want this future, but I gave so much time already. What else can I do?” he asked.

In response to his lamentations, the cat began to purr, soothing vibrations carrying deep into his leg. The warmth muted his toiling mind.

“You’re right. I have time, I can wait. Wait. I almost forgot, I made you something,” he said, stroking the cat with one hand while fishing in his pocket. He withdrew an old luggage tag fixed about the tail of a tie, and held it out for his friend to smell.

“I said you needed a name right? Well here it is. I promise I’ll get you a better one soon,” he said, sliding it gently around the cat’s neck, before reading it aloud. “Mandy.”

The cat meowed, squinting its eyes, tail whipping about.

“Barry Manilow is one of my favorite singers, and you remind me of his song ‘Mandy’, want to hear how it goes?” he asked.

The cat twisted itself into a playful spiral. He sang, Mandy trilled. For a moment—

The distant campus bell tower tolled two little tones. He checked his phone,

3:01 AM

Saturday, March 15

and conceded.

He looked back at Mandy, who rolled about, indifferent to the water and dirt.

“Do you want to stay inside tonight?” he asked, opening the slider.

Mandy stared at him and stepped a few paces back.

“Well I can’t come with you. Believe me, I wish I could stay out here,” he said.

Mandy’s eyes fell to the plants before retreating further.

“I know,” he said. “You can come back tomorrow though, I have time after the follow-up. We can stay out in the rain as long as you want.”

The cat paused, pupils so wide Nero saw himself in their reflection. Without a sound, Mandy ran into the mist. The palette on his patio was one color short. He consigned himself to a restless night, a choice burning in his skull.

-

He awoke to a morning with little light. Bypassing breakfast, he began washing the dishes, delicate and noiseless as he could manage. Shay would not be up for hours. After the final dish lay dripping in the drying rack, he heard drumming on the rooftop.

Despite its serenity, two days of rain could overfill his pots. He’d have to shelter them.

The night had been restless, but fruitful. Nero knew what mattered to him most now, he simply needed the courage to choose. He collected his good shoes on his way to the patio door, preparing to move his plants. All he had to say was no, one word.

“Do you remember our first dinner at Manassero?” Shay said.

Nero turned to see her sitting on the edge of the couch. A faded, oversized t-shirt draped over her crossed legs like willow fronds. She was beautiful, he felt the eddies of tiny butterflies flutter and melt his cold veins. Her voice was soothing, last night faded from his mind.

“It was a day just like this,” he replied.

The dimness shadowed her infectious smile. “You were so worried about the table, and then the waiter forgot your food,” she said, eyes wandering through the past.

“I had never been someplace so expensive,” he said.

He remembered, albeit too well. Three years ago, before the dark apartment, before weekly dinners at Manassero. They were still in their undergrad, naive, he remembered that face. It was a time when this reality was still an ignorable future.

“We had such a nice night. We had that delicious flan. We walked back to the car in the rain,” she said.

He could hear something beneath her voice, a tone he hadn’t heard in months.

“Shay I—”

“I wanted to wish you luck before you left,” she said.

It was unexpected. Her eyes were emotive, softened, he was overcome with guilt.

“Thanks. I’m sorry for last night, I overreacted,” he said.

“That’s okay, you tried. It’ll be better when we get out of this place. Villa Vista will help bring us back, it’s all we need,” she said.

“I am trying, trying to get us back there,” he said.

She slid her warm hand into his, wrapping another arm around his shoulder. He stared down at her. Her brown eyes were wide above a wantful smile.

“Then you’ll get this job right? For us?” she said, stroking his neck.

He could not look away.

“I’ve been in six years of school, what else could I do?” he said.

He checked his phone,

7:33 AM  
Saturday, March 15th

and ran, he was late.

He could feel Shay’s eyes following him as he grabbed his tie from the rack and sprinted out into the rain.



-

The storm had yet to subside as he left campus. Dense clouds obscured even the moonlight, leaving the yellows of street lamps and the blues of speeding high-beams as the only means of sight. The lights gave volume to the rain, his vision was caged.

The smell of wet asphalt stung his nose as he meandered home, aimless and trodden. He disregarded the downpour around him, attempting to catch every raindrop on his suit.

His mind was hyper fixated on the events of his day, no matter how far he walked, the follow-up's wake was omnipotent, inescapable. He called Shay.

"I got it," he said.

The roaring of wet tires was deafening, the rain added static to the phone call.

"I'm so happy for you," she paused. "You said yes, right?"

"Yeah."

Water pooled in his mouth to choke him upon every word, drenched hair plastered over his eyes like ivy.

"We'll celebrate at Manassero soon," she said.

His path was set, the choice was made, he hadn't been strong enough to veer.

He still had his garden, limited though it was. More importantly, he had Mandy. He could hear a faint meow. It would sustain him, the position was simply to keep him afloat, and Shay.

"Like you said Nero, six years of school paid off, you did it. You can give up on those—"

The phone disconnected, perhaps she was out of battery.

No matter how slow he walked, the landscape of home arrived, starting first with the street sign. A horn screamed, high beams ignited the sign into a torch. He turned inward, shielding his face from the muddy splash.

Beneath it all, a sickening crunch hit his ears. Lowering his shield, his eyes fell onto an orange lump in the road. He could see the luggage

tag. In seconds his arms cradled the limp, mangled body of his friend. Mandy's eyes were vacant, clouded. Its fur was tattered, petals shredded by a windstorm.

As he pet its cold body another car horn roared. Tires squealed to a halt and headlights caught him in a white void. Blinded, he rose and turned away from his apartment. He carried Mandy to the flooded channel beside the road, and held his friend tight. He waited, for a purr, for a vibration, for anything. The storm rattled leaves and shook heavy drops from old live oaks.

Tears and rain, indistinguishable, fell onto his friend. Mandy loved the water. He forced himself to imagine his friend running towards a field of poppies by the sea, returning his colors to them.

He laid Mandy into the creek, and waited. Alone.

He checked his phone,

12:01 AM

Sunday, March 16

and walked.

Night had passed, tomorrow was here, nothing could be done. He knew he had forgotten to shelter the plants; the storm had drowned them. His phone chimed as he stood behind the glass door to the patio, ruins. He checked all that remained,

*Hello Nero,*

*Congratulations on joining the Applied Technologies family! We are delighted that you accepted our offer, and cannot wait to begin your onboarding process. You are one of us now, and with that...*

he turned it off, and conceded.

# The Death of Passion

## Asmahan Karam

Watch my words echo to those they cannot reach.

Through my persistence,  
the roses will wilt.

With thorns  
that pierce through the scopes of reality,  
The stems  
have lifted for me to arise.

Yet when I escape,  
the draws of life will shut  
And I reveal myself to those who won't remember

My dying passion,

My fading ember,

My decaying heart.

As the guiding light suffers,  
I aim for the concrete.  
Where I lie surrounded by others.

Those who have loved.

But not as much

As those who have triumphed in the pursuit of their destiny.

For what is passion if not love

And the connection of my soul to the idea of my realm?

As I distance myself from my path,

I allow monetary value to dismiss my wrath.

For when a new tomorrow comes, I'll fade away.

Just like today.

# That's Life – They've Shut the Door

Elizabeth Brown

That's life—they've shut the door on me now,  
And I've no choice but to stare at my own helpless face  
Reflected in the glass—that magic mirror they swiveled to a close.  
And it remains still, a melancholy portrait  
Caught frozen, trapped in a prison of ice.  
The summer is over now, and that once wavering lake has  
Gone still, impaled and immobilized by microscopic sheets of  
crystal.

Confronting the mirror, I reach to pull the handle,  
Like a misguided moth driven to the candle,  
I long to step into the light, the warmth of that sphere  
But it's locked and as hard as I yank it won't budge,  
And as hard as I shut my eyes, I still open them to find  
Myself—standing  
Eternally  
Here.

On the patio, the pavement, the back of the house,  
Where weeds grow between cracks and wooden fences  
Crumble after long drunken summers, their  
Brittle bones aching, splintering to sink back into the ground,  
That warm damp earth from which they first sprung.

Those inside seem so unreal to me, like  
The uncanny figures dancing and chattering  
In the light, the swollen heat, the dense jungle of a mangled  
dream—  
These shadow figures draw shaky lines as they perform behind a  
thin screen.

I watch this swarming circus flutter on without me,  
Carrying its chaos and nightmarish feel,  
Its commonness, its once fresh amusement cheapened,  
Made thin and whittled down over the hours,  
Though still alive, now stumbling  
After all its steeping in sickening drink.

Some invisible hand lifts my chin, directing my eye  
To the window on the second floor, and  
On its surface I see the nearly full moon,  
Nearly ripened, nearly complete, in her smooth circle of pearl.

Her halo of light sprinkles down misty pity that  
Soothes my thirst in this concrete desert  
Where I've been banished—my new home  
Among the pill bugs and the rusty hose,  
One with the worms and withering shoots of grass.

My garden of decay, of degradation,  
That will forever remain still, forever unchanged,  
Forever occupying its own slice of time.

# On a Rooftop

## Jade Stankowski

EXT. MICK'S HOUSE - ROOFTOP - NIGHT

Intoxicated hiccups and giggles. Mick and Cass lie on the rooftop, sprawled out on a bed of grimy shingles. Mick fumbles a half-empty vodka bottle to Cass. Cass takes a swig.

CASS

So that's why I spent all of sophomore English class having a crush on Lord Alfred Tennyson.

MICK

There was an Alfred in our class? That's fucking sick.

CASS

No, the Victorian poet with the bald spot. 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?"

MICK

Wow. That was beautiful, Cass. You should write that down.

CASS

(laughing)  
No, I didn't-

Cass snorts with laughter, making Mick cackle. Mick belches, prompting the girls to laugh even harder. Cass spills the vodka over the roof.

CASS (CONT'D)

(picking up the bottle)  
Oh shit!

Laughter subsides.

CASS (CONT'D)

So, speaking of crushes. . .

MICK

Nope. No, not gonna happen today.

CASS

Come on, I promise I won't tell anyone from school.

MICK

No one from school's even alive anymore.

CASS

So? Hotness is eternal, Mick. Everyone dies, but not everyone dies sexy.

MICK

Oh, oh, I got a quote: "Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die."

CASS

You do know Alfred!

MICK

He said that? I thought it was Paddington the Bear. Or is it just "Paddington?"

CASS

As much as I love "Charge of the Light Brigade," I could never get past that line. Like, god forbid you take one moment to think about death.

It hits Cass -- they're going to die soon. Mood darkens. Mick sits up, then Cass. Sobered by fear.

CASS (CONT'D)

Shit.

Mick notices Cass's dejection. Mick inhales, conceding.

MICK

Okay, right before the last asteroid hits, I'll tell you my crush.

Mick offers her hand to Cass. As they shake on it, a rainstorm hits. Rain SPLATTERS against the rooftop and pushes the vodka bottle off the roof's edge. It SHATTERS on the street below.

CASS  
(laughing)  
Oh god. Should we go inside?

Mick knows this is the last rainfall she'll ever see.

MICK  
Nah. I don't wanna miss the rain.

Mick and Cass lie down. Cass takes off her brown flannel jacket and lays it on Mick, who shivers in a crop top. Mick inches closer to Cass so they can share the makeshift blanket.

MICK (CONT'D)  
Cass?

CASS  
Uh-huh.

MICK  
Do you think I'm a shitty person?

CASS  
No. Do you think you are?

MICK  
I think I was shitty today.

CASS  
I think I was too. But everyone's kinda shitty, right? Just because you're shitty sometimes doesn't mean you're a piece of shit.

MICK  
Maybe. Cass?

CASS  
(slightly laughing)  
Yes, Mick?

MICK  
Do you think all couples just hate each other?

Cass contemplates.

CASS  
I wouldn't say it's hate so much as suffering. Think about every great love story.

MICK  
Right now? That's, like, a lot.

CASS  
What I mean is, the one thing the best love stories have in common is suffering. The lovers ache and seethe for one another so much that they vomit or die or both.

MICK  
Sounds like Cupid's arrow is more of a noose.

CASS  
People love having their breath taken away.

Mick holds out her hand. She watches as rain pools in her palm and trickles between her fingers.

MICK  
Do you really think no one's in love?

CASS  
I think we're spoon-fed what love is supposed to look like.

MICK  
But that was back then. Today we have Hallmark movies starring D-list Hwhite actors.

CASS  
Maybe no one's poisoned anymore, but still, all we see is that love is filled with any or all emotions. So when our passion fades -- that noose loosens -- we tighten it again or strangle ourselves.

Tears fill Mick's eyes.

MICK

No. Love is easy. It has to be.

CASS

Mick.

MICK

I'm not saying it's all sunshine and rainbows. I mean, yes there are rainbows if you're queer. But love is supposed to be easy. Love should be fucking easy. Just don't be an asshole, and if you are, apologize. It's not that hard.

CASS

People aren't like that, Mick.

MICK

I am.

CASS

Mick.

Silence. Water streams down Mick and Cass's faces. It's unclear whether the liquid is rain, tears, or both.

MICK

We make love hard. We complicate it because we can't accept that something simple, and harmless, and genderless, and boundless is ours for free. We attach strings to love because, without those strings, without walls and borders, we think everything's gonna fucking fall apart. We're terrified a good thing can be bad, so we go ahead and make it hard.

CASS

Are you terrified?

MICK

Sometimes. Are you?

Cass holds Mick's hand. Cass sighs.

CASS

Always.

Rain washes dark grime off the shingles, revealing the roof's light grey hue. Water streams into the gutter.

Under the night sky, surrounded by a meteorite-gouged landscape and devastated buildings, a suburban neighborhood sleeps. All except two girls on a flooded roof.

FADE OUT.

# Architectonic Anthropocene

2013, 84" x 84" oil on canvas over panel

Ian Pines



# HUMAN

Claire Chan

We are but cells stitched  
together only to be torn  
apart by the wounds of age  
We are skin that sheds  
and is birthed fresh once more  
only to be ripped off and forgotten  
We fall apart in bits and  
pieces, dying each time  
We exercise what it means to be alive  
each heartbeat closer to our last  
We are but whispers of what was  
extensions of ancestors, serving as legacies  
We sleep with eyes half closed  
believing in the promise of possibility  
To awake with eyes half open  
living in the language of only now  
We are reborn  
different each time  
but are crafted  
from the same  
Breath, blood, bondage to brevity  
until we cannot be anymore.

## Emla Sydney Lehr

White cream, applied with a glove  
Or my fingers go numb  
A layer half a centimeter thick  
Covered in plastic

The nurses, they call me wimp  
Laugh when they see the cream  
Tell other patients, “It’s not so bad  
Only hurts for a second”

That’s not true. You’ve never  
Had it done to you.  
I still feel the pain  
Despite the cream. It just comes  
Later. Deferred.  
My body remembers that burning stab  
Of my skin being pried apart and  
Forced to seal around a foreign object

The cream makes the pain come  
In the car, on the way home  
Not in the hospital room  
Makes me disassociate the pain  
From the nurses that cause it  
Week after week.

And besides, when my body  
Has been broken and battered  
For a decade now,  
I am not weak for minimizing  
The one pain I have control of.

## Are Plant-Based Diets the End of Culture? Malia Weingarten

My housemates and I like to say we are the most functional college house in San Luis Obispo. We take care of three energetic cats, light our fireplace on cold winter evenings, and change our own engine oil in the comfort of our driveway. We pay our bills (mostly) on time, frequently deep-clean the kitchen, and ensure our houseplants get enough water and sunlight. We even cook family meals together.

To make sure that these large family dinners can cater to everyone’s dietary restrictions, we often lean towards foods that can easily substitute marinated tofu or chickpeas for meat to accommodate our housemates with dietary restrictions: stir fry, scrambles, ramen, musubi, and curry. Even though we cook a wide variety of family meals, it can become difficult to find the ingredients for ethnic cuisine in the heart of California’s central coast; one of San Luis Obispo’s defining features is its majority white population, an intimidating 88.4% (Census Bureau). Our house, for scale, has 2 people of color out of 7 housemates: Jeremy, who is of mixed Asian American descent, and I, who am hapa (white and Filipina). The two of us see our family meals as an opportunity to share our cultures with our housemates, some of whom choose to be vegan and vegetarian for ethical reasons. These dinners have introduced Jeremy and I to a new branch of food politics: the blossoming tug-of-war between plant-based diets and animal-centric cultural dishes.

The phrase “tug-of-war” in this case is, truthfully, a bit extreme. It does not mean that plant-based diets are the direct opposite, antithesis, and Public Enemy #1 of global culinary traditions. Many cultures—Indian, Ethiopian, Korean, and Mediterranean—provide ample space for people who cannot consume meat. What I mean by a “tug-of-war” is that the drive to find plant-based ingredient alternatives to originally



animal-centric cultural foods, at a certain point, can compromise a dish's cultural integrity. This is where new-age food politics make their entry: at what point do these new substitutions for meat, eggs, dairy, honey, etc. come at the cost of the dish's cultural character? What elements characterize the culture of a dish? How much does it matter whether these changes come from people within the culture or outside the culture?

I grew up with two parents whose love language was sharing food and this has shaped much of my identity today. About 6 months ago, my mom came to visit me for the weekend, and part of her love language (especially as a Filipino mother) is making sure her daughter has enough food to eat. I requested that, if we make pancit—a classic comfort dish made with rice noodles, meat, and vegetables—that it be made vegan: we would substitute tofu for longanisa and soy sauce for oyster sauce. On this occasion, my priority was sharing my cultural food with my housemates, rather than making the comfort food that my mom and I consider “true” Filipino food. Because food has been my family's medium of love, comfort, and connection, it makes me happy to accommodate for my housemates and share friendship through food. But, that choice opened up questions for my mother about what made her pancit true to her culture. “Turning the pancit vegan made me really anxious,” she would later tell me. “I wasn't sure if I would mess up a [traditional] ingredient that would make it non-vegan again, and I wasn't sure if I really served Filipino food.” That observation struck me as interesting, because my mom didn't know at that time that I would be writing this piece. The fact that she worried of her own accord whether her vegan creation stayed true to its original culture helped to validate my belief in the cultural significance of our ingredients.

The topic of identity within food necessitates reintroducing Jeremy because he and I have forged much of our friendship over this very topic. While we are both of Asian-American descent and mixed race, Jeremy grew up in a county that is roughly  $\frac{2}{3}$  white. So, as someone with incredibly limited access to a community of fellow Asian-Americans, he learned to find his identity in food because, to him and his family, food remains the central cultural stronghold. Because of that, almost any request

to modify that medium of culture can come off to him as insensitive, ignorant, or privileged. In fact, conversing with him in depth about that topic inspired this very paper. “I don't enjoy changing my foods to meet [someone's] needs unless I legitimately and emotionally care about that said individual,” he explained to me in that conversation. “I believe that the way I've prepared my food, and the way I am familiar with my culture preparing food, is not something that can be taken very lightly, and not [something] I would just change for any bystander. Because I find it very important to my identity, what makes me Asian...as an Asian-American. Otherwise, it's just genetically the way I look.” For many people, including Jeremy and myself, food not only operates as a necessity for survival, or even a place of gathering; it's one of the few ties we have to our parent cultures while discovering what it means to carry that culture into the multiracial backdrop of America. Identifying, creating, and protecting what we each perceive to be “authentic” food comes from a place of needing to stay connected to our heritages.

Authenticity looks different to everyone, and so unfortunately I can't present a clear-cut definition to set as a metric for whether an ingredient substitution comes off as authentic. Even the word “authentic” has become weaponized in postcolonial society as formerly colonized groups rush to regain and preserve the remaining pieces of their culture. For example, food writer Madhur Jaffrey's book *An Invitation to Indian Cooking* defines authentic food as specific to different regions and different traditions of India, cooked by Indians for Indians not to suit the American palate (Saxena). Personally, I interpret “authentic” cuisine as made by people who come from that original ethnic group who have some kind of historical tie to that dish. So, along the lines of Jaffrey's sentiment, authentic Filipino food, to me, is cooked by Filipinos without catering to palettes that would contradict Filipino traditions. However, what looks authentic to me, the writer, or you, the reader, will likely vary between our cultural foods, histories, and levels of access to ingredients. Instead of seeing lack of a concrete definition as an obstacle in the path for a “correct” answer, though, I see it as another string in the web of global culinary practice and preservation. After all, the world

contains many people who cook, many people who have opinions, and many, many people who have opinions about cooking. Amongst all these differences in backgrounds and ancestries, however, remain two common ties: the need to eat, and the need to connect. No matter what differences appear in global food practices, how we connect through food will evolve over time based on how we choose to eat.

This is the reason why, during my house's family dinners, I don't go out of my way to suggest Filipino foods. I know that in order to share my favorite dish, kare-kare, with my housemates, I would need to substitute pork with tofu, bagoong with mushroom paste, and beef broth with vegetable broth. Even though that dish could have the prefix "Vegan kare-kare," I feel that at that point it's a completely different dish. When we share cultural recipes, we end up sharing stories about our family's our cultural history by way of the ingredients that compose the dish. If my housemates ever requested Filipino food, I would be happy to cook for them as accomodatingly as possible because I care about them. That to me takes precedent. But in the wide scope and long run, changing those recipes worries me because I don't see the story of the Philippines in those dishes. Am I serving something that is still true to its country of origin?

Oftentimes, vegetarianism and veganism, invokes the mental image of its stereotypical demographic: young, white, upper-middle-class Americans living in privileged, affluent cities. If the stereotype was true, it would implicitly add a layer of whitewashing and gentrification to the practice of plantification in the United States. However, the group that actually composes the United States' fastest-growing population of vegans and vegetarians is African Americans. Statistically, because African Americans are more likely to develop heart disease due to a combination of systemic poverty, lack of education, and a culture of showing love with high-fat-and-sugar foods, plant-based diets are a method of preventative care and survival. The importance of that statistic is that the back-and-forth between plantifying foods and honoring traditions are not always about the whiteification and gentrification of ethnic recipes, and changing recipes through ingredient substitution does not always carry

colonizing undertones. Veganism is an expanding umbrella and carries a multitude of ethnicities, food types, motivations, and extremities within. Innovation and tradition don't automatically detract from one another, but I believe it is most certainly an intersection that will gain more traffic and attention in the coming years of culinary evolution.

Cultural dishes combine history and resources in a way that holds up a complex mirror to the rest of the world. Food stands as one of the few universals across humanity: no matter what culture we come from, we all need to eat. For that reason, food traditions say, like nothing else, "This is who we are." If I set down a cultural dish for people, it's a statement: "This is where my heritage comes from." I want to be able to do my culture justice in the ways I know how. The new age of plantifying diets, depending on who it comes from, either signals innovation and accessibility, or gentrification and overwriting, depending on a multi-dimensional web of factors that I as a sole undergrad student cannot entirely list. Some of those factors—who's changing the food, what substitutions take place, what kind of flavor they contribute, for whom is it changed, etc.—determine a food's authenticity to its own culture, but who are any of us to concretely judge what "authentic" means? The hard part about such a complex topic is that there are very few clear-cut answers. The politics of food heavily depend on the subjective: personal opinions, lived experiences, the instability of the present, and the obscurity of the future. It's all complicated, but the more I can explore this topic with others, the more I hope to understand how such a homey, essential place as the kitchen can drive such powerful cultural change.

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## Postmodern Prolepsis: The Gothic Architectonic

2017, 72" x 48" oil on canvas over panel

Ian Pines



## plums Gazelle Chen

The urn in the corner  
of Amá's living room  
is like the urn my mother  
tipped over, when she  
was five, shattering  
a pattern on her shin.  
The doctor sewed five  
stitches into  
her skin, but Amá  
is the one who fainted  
instead. But every

spring, she fills  
the urn with green plums  
no bigger than her  
thumb, three slashes  
scored across  
their rumps. I tried  
once and slit  
a line of blood  
along my thumb,  
but Amá did not faint  
this time. And every

plum layer she  
packs with a heavy  
dose of sugar.  
A pinch of salt.  
And when the urn is full,  
she seals the lid  
with a sheet of plastic,  
some tape, a yellow  
post-it note with the  
date, then she waits  
for when I arrive come  
summer, the plums

are no longer green  
or sour, but wrinkled  
like the lines Amá spells  
away from her face  
with the potions she applies  
every morning and night.  
They grow no bigger  
than my thumb, only  
sweet with a touch  
of tart. On hot

humid days, Amá  
mixes the brine  
with a glass of water.  
*Plum juice*, she says,  
*because ice is no good  
for you.* By winter,  
only dregs are left  
in the bottle I bring  
home, long  
drained to soothe  
my aching throat.

Amá calls them *méi* (梅)  
not *lǐ* (李) like the yellow-  
centered, purple-skinned  
Santa Rosas  
or the crisp blueish  
Black plums that I  
buy from the stands  
of my local farmer's  
market. Unpreserved.  
Unpickled. Fresh.  
*But in America,*  
I tell her, plums  
*are all the same.*

## Baijiu Jade Stankowski

INT. VIVIAN'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Wai Ping opens the baijiu.

WAI PING

Aye ya.

Wai Ping pours baijiu into a pair of jade shot glasses.

VIVIAN

How was it immigrating here if you don't mind me asking?  
I know you were really young when your family came from  
China. Sorry if I'm intruding, I'm just weirdly reminiscent  
today.

WAI PING

Yeah, no. Thank you for asking. Um, it was difficult for sure.

She turns to face Vivian.

WAI PING (CONT'D)

I grew up in this little beat-up cafe my parents opened. Our  
apartment is a fucking mansion compared to it. I mean, hot  
water, are you kidding me?

Vivian smiles. Wai Ping screws the baijiu lid back on.

WAI PING (CONT'D)

And my Po Po lived with us, and my three brothers, and even  
my auntie at one point. But it's weird. Even during the sum-  
mers with no air conditioning when the house was basically  
just my brothers' evaporated sweat and farts, I felt like I could  
breathe in a way I couldn't outside.

Wai Ping closes her eyes. She inhales. She opens her eyes. Exhales.

WAI PING (CONT'D)

There's something about speaking Mandarin, and losing at Mahjong, and smelling my Ma and Ba's jook simmering for hours that just makes me feel so human.

VIVIAN

Yeah?

WAI PING

Yeah. I think I learned from a young age that the only way to survive in Canada and, you know, white supremacy was to make myself into my home. Because when some people see me, they see a shitty, dumpy little cafe. But I see home.

Tearing up, Wai Ping points to the shot glasses.

WAI PING (CONT'D)

Fuck, are we gonna drink?

VIVIAN

(wiping tears) Oh yeah. Cheers!

They clink glasses and down the liquor.

FADE OUT.

## I Don't Sydney Lehr —After “I, too” by Langston Hughes

I don't sing America.

I am the sidelined sibling.  
I am allowed to sit at the table  
When company comes,  
But I may not speak  
Others talk over me;  
Think of me as a child.  
But, my mind is strong,  
Only my body fails.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes,  
And I will be asked  
my perspective  
Nobody'll dare  
Not listen to me.

Besides,  
They'll see that my value  
Is more than my labor  
And be ashamed—

I don't sing America.

But I want to, too.

# Heirlooms

Brigitte Kime

we are measured  
by the vastness beyond ourselves  
we do not measure.  
I don't know  
if humankind understands  
itself: the fact  
of being human is somehow  
not easy knowledge,  
somehow  
our own understanding  
was not ingrained in  
our birth, somehow  
not passed down in  
the family heirlooms  
we keep. if  
our knowledge of each other  
isn't found in the journey,  
then even the cold  
hands of death that  
take our children cannot  
give us the rubrics we  
need to understand.

somehow, it's not  
humankind after all,  
that limits us. it is  
the vastness  
we do not enter.  
it is the blood  
we do not let own us.  
it is the pair of lungs  
we allow  
to expend itself  
over a deed we  
wash over our filthy  
hands, hands meant  
to wash another's  
clean. the lone

river rock allows  
itself to become used  
to the streams that  
surround it. and  
what happens when  
the water runs red?  
acceptance  
is the silence that  
kills: the rock will  
erode either way and  
soon the pebbles left

behind will forget  
it was once  
a cold river rock  
that stood to divide,  
stood for that reason  
alone, secured in  
grains of sand  
that once forgot  
they were pebbles.

## Irreparably Sydney Lehr

My heart is a weathered stone  
One drop of frozen water  
In exactly the right place  
Caused it to be rent in two  
Irreparably

# Oh to Love a Soldier

## Tyra Adair

I write this to you, possessed by the strange feelings which you left with  
me when you had no choice but to leave me

I write to this to you, while the contours of your body, the firmness of  
your hands, and the sureness of your lips are imprinted on my  
skin

I write this to you because when I close my eyes I see flashes of your shy  
smile, and the way you avert your gaze when mine remains firm  
and it brings a shy smile of my own

I call this 'Oh to Love a Soldier', because it is the only way to appropriate-  
ly describe the strange feelings which you left with me when you  
had no choice but to leave me

Oh to Love a Soldier, is to approach him with caution when the two of  
you first meet without actually meeting, if that could make sense

It's a collection of phone calls, Facetimes, and Snap stories, the way you  
two interact

So you can not help yourself but be wary when he pitches the idea of a life  
with you, and drowns you in compliments, as all men tend to do

You can not help yourself but be wary, not because he is like most men,  
but because the two of you are worlds apart, and you like to pre-  
tend you are a realist

With you a scholar and he a soldier, your worlds are completely different,  
not even close to being intertwined, but you say that in place of  
your biggest concern

With you a scholar and he a soldier, with you a civilian and he a warrior,  
you worry for his life, even after he reassures you countless times  
he will be fine

His nonchalance, his wit, it frightens you like a silly, simple woman, and  
you know you are anything but, so you do not want to confess that  
you fear for his life again

You refuse to cry to him and be sincere about it so you make up some-  
thing simpler, like the distance, the deployment he will later  
assure you will come

As it always comes with men like him.

Oh to Love a Soldier, is feeling excited upon his return, because he is  
home

Not home to you, but closer to home than he was before, and you can tell  
in the way his face lights up, that he loves it here, so you are happy  
for him

The longer he is in your presence, though, you feel other things too  
When you see him dance, and he leads you in one, you're surprised by his  
skill

When he invites you for a drive he's unfazed that you call him "bad", as  
he takes the turns on the road too fast, or that you think he's "dan-  
gerous", in the way he continues to drive with reckless abandon,  
both on the road, and into the lane of your heart



When the two of you lay in bed together, because you didn't want him to  
 sleep outside, you lay on your backs and look up at the frame of  
 the top bunk, pretending they're stars  
 He shares with you pieces of himself, is vulnerable, and that too surprises  
 you  
 Before your eyes he bares himself to you long before he really bore him-  
 self to you, and you to him, but that is a different memory you  
 cherish  
 More importantly, you do not want to pity him  
 No, you didn't like pity, and you know, having chosen this life, he didn't  
 want anyone's pity either  
 So you throw your caution to the wind and permit him to hold you  
 His eagerness might have been because he'd always longed to touch you,  
 but when he grips you so tightly as though you might vanish, you  
 feel his loneliness  
 It mingles with your own lonesome void, and in this way you begin to feel  
 whole  
 In this way, you begin to feel strange  
  
 Oh to Love a Soldier, is to cry as though you've lost him while he holds  
 you in bed  
 This grasp is intimate, different from the first night, or the second night  
 It doesn't matter the specifics, because the next night he's leaving you  
 Everything you'd feared has come to fruition, and the promises you made  
 to not care, to not cry, all dissipate as you realize you like him this  
 close

You like not just what he does to your body, but how he makes your body  
 feel  
 How he makes you feel  
 You're youthful and ambitious with him, and he easily grants you all  
 the power you try to grapple with him for, because grappling for  
 power is what you're used to  
 Even when you're wrong he allows you to be right, and you don't think  
 him weak for it  
 Instead, you think him smart, because it's not that he's exasperated with  
 you, but because knows how to pick his battles, and he simply  
 doesn't want to fight against you  
 He is the water that quells the fire in your body, and it's a startling sur-  
 prise, a startling match  
 You expected him to be fiercer, not mean, just simply challenging you, as  
 all men did  
 Yet you suspect he knows he is not all men, and he loves that you are not  
 all women, and it's in that way you hold each other lovingly with-  
 out saying the words themselves  
 You don't have to say it to know it, that you'll miss each other, miss so  
 many parts that lovers are supposed to miss, not like the friends  
 you remind yourselves you are  
 You want him to be yours without directly saying he should be yours, and  
 that's why this most recent endeavor, his last endeavor with you,  
 was kept secret  
 He surprised you, in a way no men had  
 Despite knowing it'd feel like a lifetime until you guys met again, you  
 were simply thankful for him coming at all

## Medieval Elizabeth Brown

Things are so different, so different  
Nothing looks the same, the simplest things don't look as they were  
I wish I had showed him one last flower, one last campus landmark,  
    campus art piece  
I wish we had done that hike to see some actual stars that night  
I wish we could dance more, dance forever, to all sorts of genres of music,  
    even the ones that didn't make sense, just as how I was feeling  
    didn't seem to make all that much sense  
I hope he is happy, and that I left him feeling more whole  
I hope he knows he made me feel whole, brand new  
I hope he knows I view him differently, things in the world differently too  
Oh to Love a Soldier, and to have these strange feelings which you left  
    with me with when you had no choice but to leave me

You were a prince once before,  
I saw you in gold sitting stately beneath your shimmering crown  
—  
You appeared to me as I laid asleep, in my peasant dreams of the  
old Days, in the stacks of hay, in the orange shadows that strike  
and play  
Before the unraveling day, sparkling against the horizon's edge,  
Lining the ridges of the village, those ancient slabs of stone  
That interlock to build a wall between you and me.

You were a warrior once,  
A knight on a white horse's back,  
Clad in clanking armor softened by a crimson cape  
And your eyes that looked ahead as you charged  
Like Galahad into dark dense forests far from home—  
All the storybooks have lied, but I know  
That it was you who pulled the sword from the stone.

I saw you on the face of a playing card,  
And on the tavern's table I had placed you down—  
Men of midnight drunken brawls,  
Stumbling, curious crowds all came and gathered round  
To see your face, no bigger than the nail of a thumb,  
Before their own.

You seemed to hold special, hypnotizing powers in this paper  
form—  
The fortune teller told me so that same night  
As I meandered round town with you tucked up my sleeve—  
She crossed before me just as I stepped into emerging dawn,  
And pointed her ragged finger towards my heart, towards my  
head,  
And claimed that where I should have sought one,  
I'd sought the other instead.

And then came billowing down  
The smoky clouds of doom and gloom—  
That wretched witch had set a hex upon my soul,  
A curse that would make me mute for a thousand years—  
With her menacing magic she sealed my lips like a  
Seamstress would merge two strips of cloth,  
Then she shuffled on back, cackling all the way  
To her crumbling shack, where she boiled  
Mushroom caps to simmer a deadly brew—  
And that, my dear prince, is why I never can speak to  
you.

## he left early - 3/20/22 Dana Craighead

he left early  
seattle is under the same rain cloud  
so of course you can see the city  
my socks aren't wet anymore

he felt guilty  
so, dig a hole in my chest  
you never thought about the afterlife before?  
it rings in my eardrums the same

spending hours  
picking out the right seeds  
all of a sudden it's springtime  
your decorations look nice, by the way

your day paints pictures for me  
these cycles are unforgiving  
there is no warm place to sit and read  
there is no painless silence

don't pour me cold brew in the morning  
you know it makes my stomach ache  
no, I don't want to heal you  
no, not at my expense

fulfillment, he said  
i'll patch up the holes in your clothes  
i'll steal your socks, mine are wet  
of course you can see the city

**-dana craighead**

# Adulthood

## Sophie Stoll

Miami wasn't the worst place to be exiled for the summer. Sure, being sent away for siding with her sister in a (totally unreasonable) argument wasn't the most ideal outcome, but Amber had set her mind on making the most of her situation. She'd been here for almost a month, and in that time she'd found comfort in the escapism that her new home provided her.

She started this particular day like any other, by launching herself feet first into the Sunnyview Apartments community pool. All things considered, the pool was fairly unimpressive. It barely stretched across the length of a few parking spaces, and the thin film of leaves and pollen coating the water's surface made it clear that nobody cleaned the pool that often. She loved it regardless. The privacy gave her plenty of time to think.

Over the past few weeks, Amber had developed the perfect strategy for maximizing her summer tan. It usually involved several hours of rotation between being in the pool and lying on the grass--she had it down to an exact science. Based on the whistles she'd hear from old men when she walked down the street, she figured this strategy was working successfully.

But today was no ordinary day. Today, all her hard work for the summer was finally going to pay off. And her timing had to be perfect. She dipped her head out of the water, running her fingers through her hair so she could feel the sun's rays warming every inch of her scalp. She read somewhere that the chlorine mixed with the direct sunlight served as a natural toner for blonde hair. She hoped Caden liked blondes as much as he said he did.

She heard a familiar ding sound off from her phone on one of the pool's lounge chairs. Amber paused for a moment, feeling the adrenaline

rush to the tips of her fingers and toes. With a sharp inhale, she pushed through the warm swirls of sunlit pool-water to reach for her towel and check her texts for the impending message.

*can't wait to c u tn baby girl <3.* Amber smiled to herself in relief. It was all going according to plan. *i'll be ready for you ;)* she typed back, hoping the message would convey the proper ratio of I'm-an-innocent-girl-next-door with I-will-blow-you-like-a-pornstar to maintain his infatuation with her.

She and Caden started messaging on Instagram during her first week of arriving in Miami. According to a quick internet deep dive of their mutual followers, he found her through a friend of a friend of her cousin--either that or he was just searching for girls living in his general area. He'd messaged her first with a simple *what's good?*, and they'd been texting nonstop ever since.

Caden was perfect. He had that hot white guy vibe going for him--6'4, curly brown hair, green eyes. And not only that, but he was an entrepreneur--he knew all about investing in the stock market and even had a podcast with his buddy from high school to prove it. Amber had no idea what he saw in her.

He didn't mind that she was seventeen. He said he only turned twenty two last month, and said that she seemed mature for her age anyway. This excited her. She was going to be a senior in high school in the fall, which was basically a real adult anyway.

After weeks of talking, they finally planned to meet up tonight. They would've met sooner, but it was hard to get a hold of Caden because he wasn't "on his phone that much," and he only ever wanted to see her in the evenings. Amber decided this was okay though. Besides, she needed the time to get her body to look perfect for him. He said he'd fucked a lot of girls before, and Amber wasn't going to take any chances in seeming ugly by comparison. After all, "if he's fucked a lot of girls he must be good at sex," she mused.

She checked the time on her phone--six hours until he would arrive to pick her up. No time to waste. She gathered her things and headed back to her sister's apartment.

She was greeted by Stephy screaming at the top of her lungs as soon as she walked through the door. The six-month-old baby was lying flat on her back in the center of the living room, flailing her arms in futile anguish.

“Oh, my God,” Amber said to herself as she ran over to pick up the baby. She rocked Stephy back and forth for a few moments to quell the crying before taking her back in her crib, rolling her on her side so she’d drift back to sleep. Then she bolted down the hallway to pound on Beverly’s door.

She could hear the all too familiar rhythmic creek of the metal bed frame being interrupted by panicked whispers. Amber rolled her eyes to herself. They always did this.

The door cracked open to reveal Beverly peeking out at Amber, with her brown hair disheveled and glasses askew.

“Can it wait?” she said, glaring down at Amber. Amber took a deep breath, mustering every bit of self-restraint to stop herself from raising her voice.

“No, actually. Look, Bev, I don’t care what you and Josh do in your free time. But if you’re fucking so hard that you can’t hear your child crying on the floor with no supervision, that’s a problem--which I shouldn’t even have to tell you.” Beverly’s eyes widened.

“Shit, really? I swear to God we only left her there for five minutes. It’s just that--”

“You shouldn’t leave a baby alone for any number of minutes.”

“You didn’t let me finish. Okay, I know I’m in the wrong. But sometimes when you’re so in love you just can’t help it. And we knew you’d be back to get her any minute--”

“When are you gonna stop giving me that bullshit excuse and just admit you don’t care?”

“Okay Amber, no offense, but you’ve never been in love, so you wouldn’t understand.”

Amber flinched. She looked down at the floor.

“Yes, I have,” Amber said softly. Beverly sighed, a flash of guilt spanning across her face before she regained her composure.

“Amber, you know what I mean. Like a real relationship. Anyway, that’s not the point. I’m just saying I’m glad you were there.” Amber dug her nails into her palms, biting back tears.

“Well, you’d better get your shit together because I’m not going to be here tonight.” Amber turned around and stormed off to her room, ignoring the shout of “Wait, where are you going tonight?” as she slammed the door behind her.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to suppress Beverly’s comment before it led to an unbearable thought spiral. She reminded herself that this was why it was a good thing she was here

Beverly was always the difficult child between the two of them. Even though they were only a year apart, Beverly had enough life experience to count for the both of them. When they were little they were inseparable--their parents said they could never find one without the other.. Beverly was Amber’s support, her best friend, the highlight of everyday.. And she still was...most of the time. But things were different now. As they got older, Amber had a harder time keeping up--Beverly would drag her to so many parties, concerts, and awkward double dates that it made her head spin.

“This is my baby sister, Amber. She’s a little shy so be nice to her,” she’d say to all the boys she introduced Amber to, patting her on the back in a sort of playful pity. Amber always laughed it off, not knowing how else to respond.

Their parents tolerated Beverly with begrudged acceptance for years. It wasn’t until she got pregnant and ran off to Miami with Josh that they weren’t willing to compromise their reputation for her anymore. Yet no matter how much their parents argued with her, Beverly refused to view her situation as anything other than a great idea. She was happy, in love, and ready to start a family. And she knew Josh would propose to her any day now.

Amber never had that same oppositional relationship with their parents. Amber didn't really have that intensity in a relationship with anyone. She chose to observe this conflict from the sidelines, knowing it was more complicated than it was worth to get involved. That is, until Stephy was actually born. When she saw how much Josh and Beverly were struggling just to pay his parents back for the rent at their condo, Amber knew that baby was fucked if someone didn't step in.

"We're not letting Beverly influence you any more than she already has," her mom said when Amber first suggested going to Miami. They were sitting around the kitchen table, only a week into Amber's summer break.

"And besides," her dad chimed in, "do you really think it's a good idea to be on your own with them after what happened this year?" Amber stiffened at this, narrowing her eyes at them.

"I just can't believe you're so embarrassed at how you raised your daughters that you'd rather let your granddaughter suffer than accept any blame for how you've failed," she snapped. A low blow, admittedly. She'd never spoken to them like that. Still, Amber didn't expect to be sent on the next flight to Miami that night without any assurance that she'd be welcomed back home when the summer ended. Regardless, she tried to look on the bright side.

Amber stayed at home most days to watch Stephy, which allowed Josh plenty of time to go to school and work at his dad's pool cleaning business while Beverly took classes to become a hairdresser. Nights like these were rare when Amber left the house, forcing them to make other arrangements. She had no idea what they were going to do without her when she moved back home for the school year.

Amber had already decided she wasn't going to tell Beverly about Caden. At least not until everything was said and done. She knew Beverly wouldn't approve. And as much as she appreciated Beverly's advice on things, she knew Beverly wouldn't understand. She was happy that Josh

was such a great guy and all, but Amber had already learned that waiting for someone special wasn't the direction for her.

She scanned the bathroom mirror in her room, studying the collage she'd pasted along the borders displaying every model Amber hoped to look like. "Hot Girl Motivation," she called it. Then she turned to her own reflection, squinting at her figure and tracing the outline of her curves with her thumbs. She'd done everything right the last few weeks to make this possible. She tanned at the pool, dyed her hair blonde, did sit ups. She could work with this.

Amber didn't always see herself as hot--at least not in the conventional sense. In school, she never wore anything other than hoodies and sweatpants, convinced that she just wasn't the type of girl that guys would like. It all changed when she met Tristan, who she thought was different. He listened to her, smiled with her, tried to be her friend. But now he was fucking that girl from Beverly's old volleyball team and all Amber got out of it was a trip to the hospital from starving herself for one too many days that time.

She blinked at herself in the mirror, pushing the memories to the back of her head. No, love wasn't on the table for her. Noncommittal guys like Caden were the better choice. She was going to live out her hot single girl fantasies this summer at all costs.. Which meant it was time for her to get to work.

Over the next few hours, Amber did not leave an inch of her body untouched. She curled her hair, did her nails, applied her makeup with immense precision. To top it all off, she squeezed her body into a tight baby pink dress and chunky white heels to bring the full look together. She admired her handiwork in the mirror, pulling her dress down to reveal more of her cleavage before texting Caden that she was ready for him to pick her up.

Another ding from her phone. *ok be there in 5.*

And then *maybe we shouldn't use a condom? idk if you're allergic to latex lol.*

A brief wave of anxiety flooded over Amber. It was all starting to feel so real. "No," she whispered to herself. "You want to do this. Chill out".

*whatever you want to do* :) she replied back, hoping her response was what he was looking for.

She grabbed her handbag and walked out to the living room, startled to see Josh sitting on the couch. Beverly was taking Stephy to a doctor's appointment, and she knew Josh always went to the library at night to be with a study group. He seemed surprised to see her too, jumping up a little when they made eye contact.

"Oh, hi," Amber said, stopping in her tracks. "I thought you'd be at the library by now." He shook his head.

"Nah, there was a change of plans and they're coming here now." He looked her up and down, smirking to himself.

"Does Beverly know about the guy?" he asked. Amber crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly self-conscious.

"No, can you just not say anything for now? I'm gonna tell her after," she said, trying not to blush. He shrugged his shoulders, leaning back against the couch.

"Yeah, doesn't matter to me either way." Amber breathed a sigh of relief. Ding. She pulled her phone out.

here.

With her heart racing, she turned to grab the door handle, but before she could open it she heard Josh's voice behind her.

"Hey, catch!" She reached her hand out and felt something thin and flat fall into her palm. She looked down to see the Trojan warrior logo returning her gaze. Josh's laughter rang in her ears. She shoved the condom into her purse, too embarrassed to look him in the eye.

"You are so weird," she muttered, turning her attention back to the door.

"Have fun!" he shouted after her.

Amber spotted the black car waiting outside the Sunnyview complex right away. She recognized it from the dozens of Instagram posts. Its blinding white headlights pierced through the dark parking lot. With the

blood roaring in her ears, she jogged over to the passenger side door and swung it open, hopping in with her eyes glued to her feet.

Fuck. He was so much hotter in person. She immediately recognized the broad-shouldered silhouette of the man she'd been texting over the last month. He turned his curly-haired head away from the window to greet her with his piercing green eyes. He pushed his Puff Bar to his lips, the blue light cutting through the darkness before he exhaled a large plume of smoke towards the ceiling. Rap music blasted from the speakers. The corners of his lips turned upward into a slight smile.

"Well, aren't you cute?" he said. Amber would have preferred him to use a word like "hot" or "sexy", but she guessed "cute" would suffice. She wondered how many other cute girls had been in this car before her.

"It's so nice to meet you!" she nearly shouted praying that her voice conveyed enthusiasm as opposed to pure anxiety.

"Yeah, for sure," he said, putting the car into drive and turning onto the main road. Then he turned up the music even louder and they drove in silence for what felt like eons.

"So how's your day been?" Amber said at last in an attempt to ease the tension.

"It's been chill--hey, I like this spot if you wanna just stop here," he replied, pulling into what appeared to be the parking lot of an empty park. She paused for a moment, confused.

"I thought you said we were going to your place?"

"Well yeah, but I figured this is easier."

"...oh. Okay."

"The view looks nicer in the back if you wanna move back there." She decided not to question how illogical this statement was.

"Yeah, sure."

He threw his arm around her as soon as they both were in the back-seat, compressing her body against him. She giggled nervously, and he smiled at her in return. She once again worried if he was too cute for her.

"What's this?" he said, pointing to the condoms peeking out of her handbag. Amber cringed to herself, realizing she forgot to conceal it from sight.

“Oh,” she scoffed, “I brought them just in case, but I mean, we don’t even need them.” She snatched them out of her purse and tossed them on the dashboard.

Less than a moment later Caden was on top of her and kissing her. Hard. Amber wrapped her hands around his back, trying to ground herself amidst the sudden transition. It didn’t feel like how she thought it would feel. She kissed him back, hardly being able to keep up as he slid his hands up and down her body, pulling her dress down before she even registered what was happening.

Then she felt his hand pressing on her throat, and she gasped for air, shocked at the force of his body gripping onto her. They’d talked about doing all of this over text, but she didn’t think it would feel this intense. She wondered if Tristan would have done it like this.

Caden started to unbuckle his belt, and Amber felt the panic rise as the grip on her throat tightened. She had to get out of this. She clawed at his hand on her throat, desperate to get him off of her. Her head was swimming. When his hand wouldn’t loosen its grip, she felt her face contort in despair and she broke into a sob.

“Oh, no. Oh no, no, no. Don’t do this right now,” she thought to herself. But she couldn’t help it. She felt his hand leave her neck at last, and she rolled over onto her side, crying profusely. She covered her face, mortified, refusing to look at him.

She laid there for a minute until she could compose herself, and finally peaked over to see Caden leaning back against the car seat, lighting his bong.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice paper-thin. He shook his head in dismay.

“I just don’t get why you asked me to hang if you didn’t want me to fuck you.” The tears welled in her eyes again.

“I thought I wanted to,” she whispered. Caden rolled his eyes.

“We should just go home.”

“Okay.”

She didn’t say a word as they pulled out of the parking lot, her head turning in the smoke-infused haze. She tried to cast glances at Caden to see if he felt something, anything--but his eyes never left the road.

At the fourth light they stopped at, she heard a rumbling sound behind them. A bright red car pulled up next to them, one of those low-to-the-ground types that resembled the model of a sports car without actually being one. It looked very similar to Caden’s.

It took her a moment to realize the people in the car were shouting at them. The man at the steering wheel wore a dark maroon blazer with gold chains covering his neck and wrists. The black sunglasses on his eyes reminded Amber of one of those movie stars from the 90’s, though he paled in comparison to the woman sitting in the passenger seat next to him. She was the real deal. Her black dress shimmered in the glow of the traffic lights, accentuating her bright blue eyes and long dark hair. She rested her arm on the man’s shoulder with casual ease, swaying back and forth as she pointed her fingers in their direction. They were clearly very drunk. Amber clenched her jaw, a pang of envy washing over her.

Their shouting was what finally got Caden’s expression to change. He broke his gaze off the road and rolled the window down, shouting something along the lines of “Bring it on!”. Amber couldn’t keep up with what was being said though. The pit of dread forming in her stomach was drowning out all the noise.

She felt the shift in Caden’s demeanor, saw his excited eyes flash amidst the thrill of it all. He revved the engine and sat forward, positioning himself to take off. Amber caught his wrist.

“Caden,” she whispered. “Don’t.” But it was no use. He swatted her hand away.

“Chill, we’re gonna crush them” he said, ignoring her pleading eyes.

The acceleration was instant. As soon as the light flashed green, Caden floored it, weaving through the traffic until it all faded into a colorful blur. Amber gripped the sides of her seat, her knuckles turning white. The only thing she could make out was that flashing red car up ahead, swerving in and out of the lane in front of them, just out of reach.



“I almost got ‘em,” Caden shouted above the sound of the engine, pressing harder on the gas. They followed the car onto a two-lane dirt path. The lights of the city melted behind them. The only thing visible were the headlights in front of them, veering dangerously close to the edge of the road.

Now they were almost side-by-side. Amber could see the girl cheering for her man in the driving seat, saw the strain in Caden’s expression as he fought to pass them.

She knew it would happen before anyone else did. She braced herself, and yet nothing could have prepared her for the shock of the impact. Her head slammed against the side of the door, she felt the car spin, heard Caden crying out in surprise. Their car finally slid to a halt. Amber lay against the side door, still clinging to the seat, too shocked to move.

She peered through the cracked windshield to see Caden and the other driver yelling and shoving each other. The front wheels of the red car were lodged in the dirt up ahead, the side door completely caved in. Amber pressed her fingers to her forehead, feeling the blood drip down her face.

She jolted at the sound of the side door opening. Sharp nails dug into her forearm, flinging her out of the car and onto the ground. Amber pushed herself into a standing position, finding herself face-to-face with the woman from the other passenger seat. Her smoky eyes squinted at Amber in disgust.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she said, balling her fists. Amber flinched at the aggression, shrinking against the side of the car.

“I...I don’t know. I don’t know what’s happening,” she stuttered.

“You hit our fucking car! Do you know much that shit costs?”

“I don’t...I don’t think he meant to.”

“Really? You don’t think he meant to?” Amber looked down at the ground, not wanting this woman to see her cry.

“...well I don’t really know him.” The woman’s eyes creased, the lines in her skin so much more noticeable up close.

“So you’re just his little whore or something? The condoms on the dash are just for show?”

“No, we didn’t do anything, I swear.”

“Then why the fuck are you here?”

“I just...” Now the tears were flowing again. “I wanted him to like me.” The woman scoffed, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

“Girl, grow up. That’s just part of being a woman.” She traced her fingers along her bracelet, drawing Amber’s attention to the “Proud Mom” tattoo printed down her arm. Amber immediately thought of Stephy.

In her peripheral vision, Amber could see that the interaction between Caden and the man in the driver’s seat was only escalating. Caden shoved him against the side of the red car, telling him he wouldn’t go down for something that wasn’t his fault. Amber’s hands hung limp at her sides, the fear of what would happen next coursing in her veins. The woman spoke again.

“Run, bitch. If that’s not your man I’m got gonna fucking hurt you.” Amber blinked at her in surprise.

“I said fucking run while you still can!”

Amber snatched her phone off the ground and stumbled forward, forcing herself to run in her oversized heels. She didn’t look back, too afraid of what she might see behind her. Instead she dialed 911 on her phone, hovering her thumb over the call button. She thought of Caden, how she’d have to tell the police that she was underage and attempted to sleep with a 22-year-old guy. She clicked her phone off in defeat, trudging forward into the darkness until Caden’s shouting faded into nothingness. The sounds of her panting filled the night’s silence.

Amber spotted Beverly’s car pull up as soon as it turned the corner. Amber had run for what felt like miles before she came across the green and yellow lights of this highway 7/11. She’d been sitting outside the store, holding toilet paper she’d stolen from the bathroom against her bleeding forehead and willing herself to not exist.

Beverly’s hands were gripped to the steering wheel when she stopped in front of the steps of the store. She glared straight ahead, with

not so much as a gesture in Amber's direction. Amber looked around, confused. Where was Josh? Then she looked to the backseat, spotting Stephy fast asleep in her carseat. "You did not bring the fucking baby," Amber mumbled to herself.

"Hey," Amber said awkwardly when hopped in the passenger seat. Beverly still wouldn't break her death stare with the road in front of her.

"You called Josh instead of me." Amber grimaced, a twinge of guilt forming in her chest.

"Bev, I can explain. I--"

"I can't believe how irresponsible you are!" she faced Amber now, eyes dripping venom. "You're gonna go out with some guy on the internet you've never met looking like a fucking coke whore and not even think to consult me! You're a fucking idiot, that's what you are. You're lucky you didn't get killed at this rate. I just don't get it. You're gonna cry the whole year over your friend stealing your little crush and starving yourself half to death just to go and do this?"

"I said you're not letting me explain--"

"No, do not interrupt me! Josh works his ass off in school and you have the nerve to call him out in the middle of nowhere to come get you! And then of course he has to send me to get you and I have to keep Stephy out way past her bedtime because unlike you, he actually has real shit to do. And you didn't even call the cops? You're just expecting us to file a police report for you too while we're at it? I mean, I don't even know if I can trust you to be around my daughter anymore after this." Amber recoiled, rendered speechless by the sting of Beverly's words. Then she roared with anger.

"Beverly, shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up. You don't know shit. Have you thought about that? Have you ever once thought that you don't actually know what the fuck you're talking about?" Beverly leaned back, stunned. They'd argued before, but this was different. Amber never raised her voice.

"You are one of the saddest and most pathetic people I've ever met. You're really going to attack every person on this earth to convince yourself that you're a smart person? You think I'm a bad influence on Stephy?"

"I'm the only reason that kid is still alive. I mean, this guy hurt me," she said, her voice catching in her throat. "And he doesn't care. And Tristan didn't care. And you don't care. Do you really think Josh is out studying all those nights he's out of the house? If you do, you're even more delusional than I thought." They were both crying now.

"Let's just go home," Beverly said, starting the car engine.

They drove home in silence, their tears filling the gaps between their unspoken words.

The baby didn't stir once.

## Spider on a Fig Leaf

Isaac Rudnick



## i felt it in my bones - 4/25/21

Dana Craighead

he loves the color blue  
the way I love the color green  
and when I love something  
the love extends from my soul  
and wraps a warm, loving light  
around even the darkest things

so if he can love blue  
the way I love green  
imagine just how much  
he could someday love me

**-dana craighead**  
(btw, he never loved me)

# I Know Why Jealousy Is Green

## Noelle Amey

I know why jealousy is green. Snakes can be green, which I tried to tell you she was. Praying mantises are green and I swear she looks like one. Hellebores can be green and she's a hell of a bore. Parrots can be green and she only repeated what you wanted to hear. Kale's green and she's the unwanted decoration around the plate. Limes are green but I suppose she's your latest squeeze. Jade is green and I guess she'll give you what I cannot.



I don't suppose it was my overbearing nature that drove him away. I was always very good to him: I was there from early in the morning to late at night, made him breakfast, lunch, and dinner, did the cleaning and the laundry. The least he could have done was invite me to live with him. But even after all that, he refused to love me.

Peter Charlington and I met exactly eleven months and two days ago when he saw me cleaning his mother's house; something I used to do to pay my rent, which was all I really knew how to do. He came right up to where I was scrubbing the tabletop and told me he needed someone like me in his life. Someone like me he said! No one had ever said such enchanting words to me before. I knew right then that we were meant for each other. In all the novels I read throughout my life, the gallant gentleman would proclaim his love in a fit of passion that he couldn't bear to keep inside any longer. Just as my gallant gentleman had done before me with his own proclamation, and as the remarkable maidens would return with their own vow, so did I. I told him I would be whatever he needed. That is how they would respond in the stories at least. It was my very own Cinderella story.

The very next day, I quit working for his mother and focused solely on making the new man of my life happy. I had really believed Peter to be

so infatuated with me. Especially when he asked that I come to his house every day; he clearly had a rather difficult time staying away from me. I would be there nice and early to prepare breakfast for him and would help around his house while he was working. He always came home so exhausted so it was the least I could do to lighten his load of chores. He confided in me that his workdays consisted of brutally long hours. It must have been so horrendous for him out there because he could never bring himself to tell me what it was that he did that brought on such burdens. As such, I did what any good girlfriend would do and made sure to have dinner prepared upon his arrival. I even packed the lunch he would take with him to work. I knew for a fact that I was the reason Peter's life improved so considerably.

His kitchen was a disastrous sight before I came into his life. He had all sorts of spoiled food in his refrigerator and pantry, plus a lingering odor that grabbed the nostrils and violently shoved them into a dumpster that housed rotten meat and a family of raccoons. The walls had once been white but since peeled to reveal the gross brown underlayer. The cabinets had food splotches and scratches. All in all, a clear cry for help.

I remedied everything in that kitchen. The walls were returned to their original white color without a peel in sight. Old food was quickly discarded, and the wooden cabinets were scrubbed vehemently and touched up to conceal the nasty scraps. A bottle of Lemon Pledge later and the kitchen was good as new. I even bought a bouquet of hellebores to decorate the dining table.

Peter was so thoughtful; he even remembered my birthday. I don't recall ever telling it to him, but he must have managed to find out in some way. One day I was going around collecting the trash from each room to take to the bins when he called after me saying, Oh, here! He then revealed an older looking Pez dispenser with the likeness of Snow White. I couldn't form any words to say, they all caught in my throat. So I managed a small smile and nodded my head so he would know how much it meant to me. He was basically calling me his princess! He thought of me as a woman who was strong, beautiful, and worthy of an epic romance. All the heroes in the novels gave their loves little gifts too.

The Pez dispenser gift was a sign: He saw me as Snow White, and he was my Prince Charming.

When I was around him I lost myself. I could have drowned in the honey of his eyes. When they raked over me, my skin would burst into flames and then immediately douse itself. His smile was nothing less than charming, of course. If he and I weren't right, then I never wanted to feel so wrong in love; two hearts drawn together and bound by destiny. He was mine, and I thought that nothing could tear us apart.

But if I had to pinpoint the exact moment when our epic romance took a turn for the worse, it would have to be the night I made apple pie for the first time using only green apples.

The dessert was decadent, and I had the feeling he would want to sleep with me after that. But alas, he did not. Whoever told me the way to a man's heart is through his stomach clearly never bedded a man before. Instead, he rose, thanked me for dinner, and went to his room down the hall of the one-story house, and to the right. That was usually my cue to wash the dishes and head on home.

I still cannot remember what possessed me, but after the last plate was dried and stack away, I tip-toed down the hall and flatted my ear against his bedroom door.

He was talking to someone.

A woman.

Why would Peter want to talk to anyone else when I am right here? I shifted my weight and repositioned my feet, to which the carpeted floor betrayed me with a tumultuous creak that seemed to shout: "THE BEST GIRLFRIEND YOU'VE EVER HAD IS SPYING ON YOU!"

I expected anger from Peter at my spying, but all I got was a side-hug, a few polite words of conversation, and a personal escort out the front door when he saw me standing there. He also handed me an unsealed and unmarked envelope with cash in it. Another reason I could have sworn he cared about me: he gave me a stipend every week so I wouldn't have to work anymore and could devote all my time to him.

He had opened his bedroom door without so much as a shred of guilt, as if he wasn't just talking to another woman while I was quite literally

in the other room. He must've thought I just walked up and didn't hear a thing.

In retrospect, I admit I could have asked who Peter was talking to or addressed it in some way, shape, or form rather than sitting outside his house in my silver Volkswagen Jetta every night for two weeks. Crinkled fast food wrappers and empty cups of coffee littered the passenger seat and I had since stopped seeing the floorboard after the first week. People would be surprised how little sleep you need when on a mission like this one; the defense of a loved one is a great motivator. I still could not understand why he would choose to spend his precious time talking to another woman when I was right there. I knew something must be wrong and I was going to fix it.

On that 15th day after I guarded his house loyally, I finally saw her. She was a lofty tall brunette with a slender build and mild curves. She dressed in black pants and a green long-sleeve shirt with a V-neck which accentuated her form. Her hair was cut short and fell just past her exceptionally pointy chin, which could be seen from where I was patrolling across the street.

He answered the door with a smile and wrapped his arms around her waist before he led her inside. She was in the house for three hours, thirty-seven minutes, and about twelve seconds; I didn't stop the watch quickly enough after she walked out. That night I came to the unfortunate conclusion that my boyfriend was clearly deranged. He had to be mentally unstable to see another woman while he was already with the best thing that ever happened to him. I took pity on his sickness and had decided I would stay with him and help him recover. I understood that he was most likely embarrassed and would not want to talk about it with me right away. So, bearing that in mind, I acted my usual delightful self around him while conducting myself in such a manner that would not alert him to my insider knowledge, and then by night I watched over him carefully when he thought he was by himself.

He met her two more times after that first encounter. The first place was a coffee shop with tinted windows so I could not see in very well. But the second time was at an actual restaurant and to my luck, they were

seated next to a window, so I didn't even have to move my car. I stuck a few quarters in the meter on the sidewalk and got back in the car. I adjusted my seat backward to give myself a little more leg room; I figured I was going to be there a while. Soft notes of music trickled out of the radio. I didn't know the song, but the voice was pleasant enough.

She ordered a kale salad, he ordered steak. I finally was able to get a better look at her. Her pointed chin matched the rest of her face. She had remarkably high cheekbones, which coupled with the pointy chin gave her the appearance of a praying mantis. She wore a slim fitting strapless emerald dress that looked black at first but revealed its true color when she passed under direct light.

All throughout the dinner her wide smile seemed to stretch larger and larger while Peter seemed to laugh more and more. A sensation started to take root in my stomach and I thought I might be sick. At first I was afraid I had caught whatever disease he had which caused him to act out so unusually, but he didn't look to be in any amount of pain such that I was feeling in that moment. The sensation had spread northbound and soon my chest began to ache with such tenacity. I grabbed at it thinking if I could just get a hold of this rock in my chest I would feel better, but all it did was squeeze harder. I had felt my stomach roil and turn over until it hurt to breathe. All the air in my Jetta evacuated at once and I was left gasping and clutching my belly. All I could see was that emerald green dress flaunting itself before my eyes. I elbowed the door open and plopped onto the sidewalk. I pressed my face against the cold concrete which burned against the hot skin of my cheek. The rush of winter air filled my lungs and burned them too. I was almost certain I was dying in some way. And it was all her fault.

We had been so happy before she showed up. Her, with her wide smile and stupid little kale salad. Anyone could be that skinny if all they ate was kale. I realized then that she did not give him or me a disease.... she was the disease. Everything wrong in our life together stemmed from her arrival. I needed to save him from her. I needed to protect him. She was a venomous snake that had already sunken her fangs into my unsuspecting lover. But if I acted quickly enough, I could suck that venom out.

With my new motivation, I pulled myself off the ground and rolled back into the car, ignoring the looks of concern passersby were shooting at me. I forced myself to keep watching their interaction in the restaurant. It appeared as if nothing had changed. As if my entire world didn't just come unceremoniously crashing down. But I watched, and I waited, because it wasn't just me I was doing this for, it was Peter too.

Dinner came to a close and they walked out the front, his hand being held captive by hers. I watched as she forced him over to her own car and planted a deadly kiss on his lips, like Poison Ivy. The feeling in my stomach tried to rise again but I smothered it, I had a job to do. They parted ways and I watched to make sure he made it safely to his car before turning my attention back on her.

As she started up her own car I pulled out of the spot I had occupied for the majority of my evening. Her apartment complex was only a few blocks away and had ample guest parking, so I quickly pulled into the spot closest to the exit and jumped out of the vehicle without even taking the time to lock it. The apartment building was an older one-story red brick building with doors that faced the outside. It reminded me of an old library. She seemed not to notice anything around her besides the phone in her hand, so when I shoved her from behind after she had unlocked the door, she fell face first onto the tiled floor without a fight.

When she turned to look at me, I could see fear turn to confusion in her green eyes. I kicked the door closed and took no time in striding over to where she still laid on the floor. She had on a jade necklace of which I grabbed ahold of, and the fear quickly returned to crease her facial features. I twisted it around and around as far as it would go and held it there. She thrashed under me but lacked the upper body strength to push me off. I could hear the saliva gurgle in her throat as she tried to employ her windpipe. She clearly did not understand my reason for being there, so I informed her, You are going to help me fix this. Before her breath completely escaped her, she managed to say (not very loudly) help, help, help. She reminded me of a parrot in that moment, repeating a word I had said. She continued trying to struggle against me but I was much bigger than she was. She pulled one of her hands away from my own and

spastically searched around for some sort of aid, finding nothing. Her legs flailed and kicked a nearby table which knocked over a bowl of limes it looks like she had set out as a table decoration. They toppled to the floor, but I paid no mind and neither did she. I think she finally understood at a certain point why this was happening because her face started to relax, and she stopped fighting against me. With a final tug on the necklace, she accepted her fate and released my wrists from her grip. Her eyes focused on something behind me and maintained the staring contest long after I stopped squeezing. She dug her own grave, now she had to lie in it.

The pressure on the necklace was eventually too overpowering and the band which held the beads snapped. The sound of tiny glass spheres bouncing in all directions was all that I could hear.

With her wide open eyes, I could see that what I thought to be green eyes, were actually more of a hazel. I slowly unclasped my hands from around the now broken necklace, which as I opened my grip a couple more beads were produced and clattered away. I let the string fall to the side of her neck and stood up to depart. We were safe now, and he could be free to love me, or so I thought.

I went to Peter immediately afterwards and told him what I had done for us. I told him I saved him. But he turned on me. He abandoned me. Threw me aside like a common whore! After all I did for him; everything! He told me he never loved me. He said it was all in my head. Now I know that is not true. I know it. I'm not crazy. Nothing, he said. I'm nothing to him.

I tried to hold his hands in mine but he snatched them away and kept them suspended in the air next to his head. He wouldn't even look at me after I told him of my selfless act. He kept pacing back and forth and wouldn't meet my eyes. All he would manage to say when he did speak was that I was crazy. Psychotic, deranged, he said. I wasn't any of those things, I was just in love. I knew he was too, but still too blinded by her to see it.

This was supposed to be my happy ending! Peter was mine. Why couldn't he see it? Why was he being so cruel to me?

He picked up the phone, to call the police I assumed. I couldn't bear it any longer, to hear him lie like that to my face. He pretended as if there was nothing between us. I knew he had loved me. Soon I could no longer see him my eyes were so blurry. I couldn't stop the tears as I felt them gather and plummet down my face. I took one step back, then another, and glanced over my shoulder to the clock on the wall in his living room. The minute hand was clicking over but seemed to never reach the next number. All I could hear was my breath: short quick bursts that never satisfied the lungs. I tried to swallow but drank hot air instead. I was wrong before, about what dying feels like. I was so wrong. It doesn't feel like that, it feels like this.

I kept walking backwards until I felt the front door handle press into my back. I thought I registered the sound of my name being called and I glanced at Peter again. The phone was to his ear and his arm outstretched towards me. I shook my head and found the door handle with my hand. Opening it I ran out into the bone-chilling night and found my way to the car. The cold air froze my tears in place and burned two lines down my cheeks. I cried out in a way that seemed to bring all the pain and suffering of the world out through my parted lips. A wail that stirred a deep guttural sound awoke something dead inside me. Peter jammed his fist through my chest and ripped out my heart and flaunted it in front of my eyes. Then he crushed it in his hands until all that remained was dust.

I carried this feeling home with me and reached for the first love story I ever read and pulled it off my bookshelf: Cinderella. Those words lied to me. Those sickly-sweet promises of love were nothing but mouthfuls of ash and deceit. I tore the pages out one by one; each one deceiving and misleading. I ripped out every single page, then reached for another and continued. Nothing. He said that I was nothing to him. But he had all of me. Why was loving Peter a losing game?

The next story I reached for was the intimate romance of Lancelot and Guinevere. I thought I was the Queen, turned out I was Arthur. The irony was not lost on me. Next I reached for Snow White, then Sir Gawain and The Green Knight, and Sleeping Beauty. I ripped them all

until they were reduced to nothing more than flits of white that has been long discolored after being handled for many years.

The flakes of paper flittered around the room like falling snow. But I could still see the words. Those damn useless, meaningless, lying, betraying words! I couldn't stand to look at them anymore. I gathered all the remaining romance novels that once adorned my shelves and threw them on the pile of scattered pages. I reached for the matchbox in my dresser and struck a light. The room illuminated some, but otherwise the flame was useless. However I gave it purpose.

As the flame ignited, the chill of a cold sweat rolled down my back. I gazed around the one room apartment that had been my home for several years. Old wooden panels stacked side by side created the walls in which I lived, with an off-white tile consuming the floor. A bed with black sheets took residence in the corner with a brown desk to its left that supported nothing but a candle, a bottle of water, and Peter's gift to me. Across the room held the small kitchenette and lavatory. The flame of the match had traveled about midway down, and I could feel the heat of the fire start to kiss my fingertips.

With a sharp intake of breath, I released the match and watched it fall onto the pile of what used to be books. It didn't catch right away, but once it did there was no stopping it. I watched as all the lies I once believed in went up in smoke. I knew I had to leave; I knew I couldn't stay in the room any longer. But my feet remained planted and refused to budge. Black clouds filled the room, but I still could not go, not until I saw every last word was scorched from this world. I watched for as long as my eyes allowed me. Soon I found that all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room and I opened and closed my mouth trying to search for any remaining particle left. My eyes finally failed and shut themselves off from the smoke, and my lungs cursed me as I laid my head on the cool tile below me. There was something so sweet about death in this moment. But not like this.

Using what strength I must have had left, I managed to army crawl my way to the door leading in. It opened easily and my pathetic mass of flesh and bones flopped through.

Bright flashes of red and blue blinded me as I stumbled out onto the cement leading up to my door. I couldn't distinguish any faces through the layer of smoke that coated my eyes. But even through the haziness I could still make out the uniformed officers approaching apprehensively. There was no need to force me to the ground, I was already there. So as soon as it was obvious I had no weapon on me, my arms were forced backward and restrained while I laid on my stomach.

I was lifted as if I weighed nothing and guided to one of the cars that held the flashing lights. It smelled of sweat and vomit, which was trying to be overpowered by the air freshener in the cupholder but failing. Black metal bars within the car caged me in and I felt like a captured wild animal. Maybe in a certain way I was — am.

It did not take them very long to locate me given Peter's betrayal. I do not expect you to understand why I needed to do this in the first place. I still would have thought that my devotion to him would count for something, but not once did he come and visit me. Not once did he call upon me or inquire as to my condition or whereabouts. I would have done anything for him.

They told me when I first arrived that this place would be the best for someone like me (the nonpareil, I was sure). But the food is abhorrent, visitation hours are exceptionally limited, and I am surrounded by psychos. How long can a woman be expected to stare at four white walls all day? I'm not crazy.

Between you and me, I don't think I did anything wrong. But to answer your question: I think I'm doing well today.

You don't think I'm crazy.

Do you?



## dermatillomania Claire Chan

don't listen to the lies my body  
tells you in the dead of night  
when my disgusting compulsions  
come alive. my sweet doe eyes,  
ephemeral; masking vicious intentions  
with an urgency to hunt, to ignore  
your denial of invitation. you succumb  
to my touch as my warmth scorches  
and holds you prisoner. all that  
was restful comes alive as limbs  
begin to tangle unforgivingly  
in matrimony with silky sheets  
and wrinkled duvet. i am starved,  
too busily fixated on the feeling  
of your flesh, desperate to hunt  
for the treasure that lies beneath.  
drooling at the promise of excavating  
all that is impure with sharp claws  
deeply rooted in your virgin skin,  
leaving evidence of my devotion  
in the thick drops of scarlet beads.  
staining my hands by tracing your  
fresh scars, with the tenderness  
of your wincing resonating in sweet,  
delicate hums, a melody of my  
indifference to your pleading and pain.  
you are desperate to be seen and heard  
but it is the itch in my brain that  
drowns out your needs and fulfills mine,  
until all blood and ooze find shelter  
in the grooves of my grimy fingertips.

## Rules of a bored lover Sarina Vachhani

Spot a man.

In a suspecting place, of course. So he'll see it coming—see YOU coming. Pick him up at a party, a mutual set up. Let him know you're a cliché, you're like every. other. girl. Don't pick him up at jury duty or in the grocery store. Don't let him think you're different or unique or special. After all, he should like you because you're like every other girl. If he doesn't, ask him if he wants any stained glass artwork for his glass closet.

When you approach him at the bar, make sure not to make eye contact directly. Instead, go for the penis or the forehead. I heard that if you stare too hard at the forehead, you might dissolve the white matter in the brain (although the bong water he accidentally drank from his nightstand might have done it first). If you make eye contact directly, it might make you appear too interested and—let's be honest—is he funny? Or are you just doing your witty, three act stand up routine?

When you speak to him, make sure to stand in kissing proximity, but look at the next guy that walks along. All men are meat. But do you want a fishstick or medium rare?

Only after he asks you three questions about yourself, ask your first question about him. The question is going to be “Do you have siblings?” This question serves a number of purposes:

1. If it's a sister, he's a human being
2. If it's a brother, you have back up options hence the aforementioned men are escargot point blah blah blah.
3. If he's an only child you can kill him and eat him medium rare.

When he asks about you, you are ALWAYS either Delta Gamma or Aphi. You are either Psychology or Communications. You like either yoga and hiking or cooking and reading. And guess what, it doesn't matter what you are, he'll gobble you up regardless. Your highschool job was babysitting. Your curling iron is 1 inch. Separate your hair (and heart) into sections and fold the strands around the barrel in opposite directions on the right and left side of your middle part. You paint your nails and watch rom coms with other women, you're scared of other women—they're so dramatic and mean! You're just like everyone else but you're so mysterious! And you know what makes you mysterious? You're bored.

Okay, you've chatted enough. Reward yourself by leaning in to kiss him, but miss his mouth and watch him get embarrassed for the both of you. Follow up this step by inviting him back to your place. Let him maintain his dignity for 1.8 seconds by thinking he's in the lead before taking scissors to your dress (he doesn't know its from Goodwill; explaining this to him would contradict your New York City high rise and he wouldn't understand thrifting in the camp, cunt, meta, way).

He widens his eyes when he sees the scissors, thinking maybe he's gonna get murdered, and the utter craziness of it all makes you tilt your head back and laugh, holding the scissors' blade to your lips cartoonishly before making egregiously large slits in the dress for him to paw his hands through and rip the fabric off of your body. The dress wasn't even tight! You just wanted him to rip it off. A one night stand is nothing if not a theatrical performance of thrilling show stoppers. Look how fun, surprising, sexy, unique, special every woman can be. Every bored woman can be.

When he leaves, make a steak. Medium rare, of course. It's a shame he didn't have siblings.

## California Ground Squirrel Carrying Straw for Burrow Isaac Rudnick



# Mother Knows Best

## Jade Stankowski

FADE IN:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

A stream of puke trickles down a stained baby bib. Using a napkin, a manicured hand -- square-trimmed nails adorned with blood-red polish -- wipes the vomit away.

RUTH (40), a sleep-deprived mother, opens the trash can. The trash is nearly full, stuffed with empty jars of baby food and photos of a teenage boy.

She picks up a photo of her and the boy. She wipes away the baby food spill that conceals their countenances. They're hugging. Two smiles -- Ruth's wide, toothy grin and the boy's coy, closed-lip smile. Her stare lingers on the photos.

Ruth tosses the photo and puke-filled napkin in the trash. She slams the lid shut.

Ruth returns to ISAAC (2), a squirmy baby, with a jar of baby food. He evades Ruth's attempts to feed him. She clasps his jaw and forces his mouth open. Isaac writhes. Her grasp tightens.

RUTH  
(to herself)

It's always the fussy ones who can't sit still. They're never quite pleased with what you give them.

Ruth force-feeds Isaac. Shuts his mouth. He swallows.

FADE OUT.

# Horizons

## Taylor Wendell Lozano

CAST

RUSS – male, 50's or 60's – Kale's father. Nervous, confused, and depressed, he wants to protect and help his child, but he is unsure of how to start.

KALE – LGBTQ+, identity defined by chosen actor, 15-19 – Russ's child. Wearing a red hat. Suffering from severe depression at the loss of their brother, Conner.

\*A note regarding Kale's identity – Some of the feedback I have recieved so far has specifically been targeted at Kale's gender. Their identity was intentionally left ambiguous as this was written with a gay, non-binary or transgendered teen in mind, someone who does not describe themselves as a straight, cisgendered male. Tory is, in my experience, an non-gender specific name. The actor of Kale is given the opportunity to stipulate specific identity interpretations within the story, including the gender identity and outward presentation of Tory. If there are any issues or questions regarding this note, please, do not hesitate to reach out.

*Sunrise, on a Sunday. The waves are lapping against the boat. An orange hue gives a glow across the lake and the ocean. KALE sits, morose, holding a fishing pole, falling asleep, red hat from some overtly masculine establishment (think: Monster Energy, truck manufacturers, etc.) The discontent is clear. KALE is singing "The Predatory Wasp of the Palisades Is Out to Get Us" by Suffjan Stevens to themselves.*

KALE

"Thinking outrageously...I write in cursive I-...hide with my hands with-...the light on the floor-"

*A moment alone until RUSS enters, seeing his child upset, and he takes a moment to compose.*

RUSS

puts on a fun demeanor and joins KALE by their side, holding his fishing pole aloft.

RUSS

Did I ever tell you about the time I broke my leg?

KALE

Yup, Uncle Rico's motorcycle.

RUSS

Your uncle had just gotten his bike, and it was a real nice one, too. So, he had had it for maybe a half an hour, and I just-

KALE

(fed up sped up version) And you just wanted to ride it so so bad so you begged and begged and begged until he let you and almost immediately you tried to skid it underneath a semi and busted the whole thing up alongside your leg and now you limp and he lost his motorcycle and always made you feel bad for it, the end. That it?

RUSS

(dejected) Yeah, I guess I have told that one a few times.

*Beat.*

RUSS

Do you know why?

KALE

Why?

RUSS

Because your Uncle Rico was so much like your brother.

*KALE's attention is drawn to this.*

RUSS

I saw it almost every day in that kid. He and Rico were the risk taking ones.

KALE

Busting a motorcycle sounds like a risk.

RUSS

Sure, I busted the motorcycle, but I always broke your uncles brand new crap. It was my job as his little brother. Sent his GI Joe Jeep down the hill an hour after he got it for Christmas. Thing popped like a balloon. It was the one thing he asked for. I watched him set that truck up all morning. I just ruined it for him.

KALE

How old were you?

RUSS

I must have been seven or eight.

KALE

You didn't know any better. Are you really wracked with guilt over a...GI Joe Jeep?

RUSS

No, hold on- that's not what I'm saying! It's just- it was just the difference in the whole sibling dynamic. Some people don't get along with their siblings. Lord knows I'm still annoying. That's why your mom gets a break today.

*They chuckle.*

KALE

Conner put his butt in wax and chased everyone around the house once.

*Beat.*

RUSS

What?

KALE

Ok, hold on, so Emmy- you remember Emmy?

RUSS

Kale, I'm a dork but I remember my sons fiancée.

KALE

Right, so, when he moved in with her, she had just gotten some wax melting kit thingy, right? For, like, joint aches, arthritis, or- whatever. Conner, doing what he did, thought it would be funny to put his butt in the wax and he proceeded to, with his pants around his ankles, chase all of us with his waxy butt for a good five minutes before tripping and hitting his face into the wall. That's where the scar on his forehead came from. After we got him into the car to go to the ER, he realized that not only did he need to remove the wax from his butt but something in the wax started to- like, he must have been allergic to one of the ingredients? I'm not really- he seriously never told you this story?

RUSS

No, but I'm kind of glad I didn't know. At least for a bit.

KALE

Huh, I would have thought he would have told you. That's pretty much what it was always like at his house: exactly like it was before he moved away.

RUSS

What was it with you two and butts?

KALE

Oh, I don't know, everything we absorbed as kids? I remember a lot of gross jokes on Nickelodeon, every movie I saw- Boogers and butts, that's what was big back then.

RUSS

I can see now why your mom was always complaining about all the gross humor in the house.

KALE

You didn't do a whole lot to stop it. Could have also been that book.

RUSS

Book?

KALE

Literally- some book about a kid who's butt-...runs away?

RUSS

That was a book!?

KALE

You bought for us. I remember cause Mom was mad at you. She said get something "scholarly," and we came home with that. Conner was the one who suggested it.

*A moment.*

KALE

How long before you got better after that-...that other accident?

RUSS

One day, I just started remembering all those old times. All these moments Rico just went out of his way...protecting this annoying little kid. He scared the crap out of everyone. A hundred and ten pounds and he made sure he was the only one who picked on me. When I needed a home, he took me in. Let me borrow his car...didn't kill me when I crashed his car. Once he became a dad, he softened-... wanted to be different, you know? So, then...when he was gone-...it just felt like I got cheated out of-

*Beat.*

KALE

Conner, too. Once he got older-...Do-...are you disappointed in me?

RUSS

What? Why would you think-?

KALE

It's just, Conner was so much more put together than me, with-

RUSS

Kale, Conner had a kid at your age, over 60k in debt- I don't think that you're doing that bad all things considering the amount of partying Conner-

KALE

It's just- I know when I was born, you and mom weren't exactly-...I know I was a mistake-

RUSS

Oh, come on, no-!

KALE

I feel like sometimes, just cause I'm not like you...or how he was...you don't want to talk to me. You and Conner- you always talked about man-crap: cars, the military, beer, all that- You went to movies, you saw sports-...things together! And, like, I know you didn't mean to, but I didn't want to always get left just doing plays with mom-

RUSS

But you were good at that. And you didn't know anything about man-crap, why would-

KALE

I wanted to spend time with you two! I wanted to know all those things! You could have taught me! I wanted to feel a part of it, whatever it was. I've just-...I feel wrong all the time, even though I know I'm ok...and I know you never said it but it always felt like some male thing I wasn't-...allowed! I miss Conner so bad- Because-...I'm not as-The stuff he'd say to make fun of me- the brother excuse only got me so far past how I've always felt about myself. I know he loved me. But, I always felt like I was less than him because he was so cool and I just wanted-...I want to be him. And I'm not-...can't, with him gone. He wasn't always the best at talking, but he'd listen and be there, even to make a dumb joke. It felt like I could trust him most days. And now, I-

RUSS

Doesn't help it's been a lot harder to cope since Tory stopped talking to you, does it? Especially on days like today-

KALE

I-...I guess. It's just another friend-

RUSS

Well, come on-

KALE

What?

RUSS

I know-...like, you and Tory- I know you guys have felt more than friends for years-

KALE

Whoa, hold on-

RUSS

It was so obvious-

KALE

Why would-? Tory and I were just friends, I don't- we didn't-

RUSS

What, you didn't have a thing for Tory?

RUSS

Oh-...oh- oh wait, no, I'm so sorry, kiddo- I- we- I don't know that you're- and I'm not saying you are, you say whatever you want whenever, but like-

KALE

How long have you known?

RUSS

Since the (KALE actor chooses. “Les Mis Broadway Extravaganza”) birthday party-

KALE

Oh my god! That was- mom wasn’t supposed to tell anyone!

RUSS

Come on! You’re mom and I shared everything, and you’re my kid! She wanted me to handle it well to support you and-...I dunno, it’s 2022?

KALE

Do you think this is handling it well?

RUSS

I’m- trying-...whatever! That’s why we’re even here! So, I just-

KALE

Wait- You-...you brought me out here as- what?

*Beat.*

RUSS

I wasn’t trying to-...I figured you’d wanna talk!

KALE

Dad, was this a-...coming out fishing trip?

RUSS

Maybe. If you wanted to, not that I’m forcing-...It sounds stupid when you say it out loud.

*Beat. KALE puts their head in their hands and begins laughing. RUSS joins, until they slowly go quiet again.*

KALE

You know, it’s been 3 years today.

RUSS

I didn’t forget. I miss Conner, too. (Beat) Look, I-...I’m sorry. I can admit-...I don’t shut up. It’s why I gotta give your mom regular breaks, otherwise she just puts up with my incessance. As for Conner, I guess- well, he didn’t talk to anyone. Like your uncle. That’s why I spent time with them, I was trying to cheer them up...even when they were drinking. Instead- we just watched cars- ...tv. No talking. It’s probably why he struggled right before the end-...He just didn’t have the skill to talk about it. It’s why I never shut up.

*Silence. After a moment, RUSS, without looking, puts a hand on KALE’s shoulder. They look at one another, and after setting their fishing poles aside, they hug.*

Conner was sick and he needed us. He needed me more. Wasn’t-...as brave-... You always pull through. I guess I’ve always been scared of letting you end up like me. (joking) And considering you’re weird as hell, Kale, I’d say I failed. I’m sorry-...for being intimidated by an eighteen-

KALE

Nineteen-

RUSS

Nineteen year old. You’re greater than I could have imagined. Just remember that, kiddo, I love you so much. You and Conner. And I don’t wanna lose you. I wanted you here to just help. Just once. Just one day... And regardless of how coming out here made you feel,/ thanks.

KALE

Coming out here (chuckle)...Thanks?

RUSS

You can always talk to me, kiddo. Could have done like other kids do- drifted away, held it in in fear. Now, I can properly do my job in supporting you no matter what. I’ll do better. I promise.

*Beat.*

KALE

I love you, dad.

RUSS

I love you, too.

*The waves lap. The wind blows.*

KALE

So, like-...did you get a bite?

RUSS

Nope. What about you?

KALE

Nothing. (Beat) Don't you put, like- bait on the fish hook first?

RUSS

(Beat) Yup... Yeah- In fact, I'm almost sure you do.

KALE

Do we have any?

*RUSS looks around, then, looks out at the horizon.*

KALE

Dad?

RUSS

I bet they sell it in stores.

KALE

Tell me the truth, I promise I won't be upset: have you ever been fishing?

*Beat.*

RUSS

No. This is the first time.

*Sharp inhale and sigh from KALE.*

KALE

I take it then that that's why when you were driving the boat, it was shaking so-

RUSS

Yeah, no- (like a question) I don't really know how to drive this thing. Never driven a boat.

KALE

Are we going to be able to get back?

RUSS

...Maybe?

KALE

How long were we supposed to be out here for?

RUSS

I gotta stop watching fishing videos at two a.m.

*They consider getting up and gathering some of their materials, but before they leave-*

RUSS

I think you should give Tory a call-

KALE

What? Why are you- There's nothing going on- besides, people don't talk on the phone!

RUSS

How else do people tell eachother how they feel-?



KALE  
Texting?

RUSS  
But if they don't talk-? (beat) I get it, you were friends- or more-

KALE  
Dad!

RUSS  
You don't need to say what you don't want to- unless! Like, unless, you know, you have questions. About, like, you know...sex things-

KALE  
Ew! What the hell, dad?

RUSS  
I don't know what I'm supposed to say! I'm just kind of winging it.

KALE  
But I don't want to talk about that-

RUSS  
I'm just saying you might-

KALE  
Ok, well, I won't!

RUSS  
Because when the moment comes, I can't be there-

KALE  
Wow, alright-

RUSS  
And, I just think, when you and someone else like eachother a lot, if you're responsible, you know, and you both consensually want to go for it-

KALE  
Dad! Don't say consensually!

RUSS  
And if it's a miss, ball's in their court, right?

*KALE begins to protest, then stops, thinks a bit about it, and sighs.*

KALE  
Right. Yeah, no, you're right...even when you're being annoying. Let's just-...Maybe do something else-?

RUSS  
Sit here another hour?

*Beat. KALE looks at the mess of fishing gear, then scoffs to themselves.*

KALE  
Sure, pop...we got time...

*They return to their seated positions, sitting in silence for a second.*

KALE  
(singing) "North of Sylvana, we swim in the Palisades-...I come out wearing my brothers red hat-"

*RUSS pats KALE on the back, they smile, and sit, "fishing". A moment as the waves lap, the wind blows, into silence. Suffian Stevens' "The Predatory Wasp of the Palisades Is Out to Get Us", or a similar acoustic tune, begins to play.*

BLACKOUT

## Dear Dad Adriana Dutra

I missed you when I walked on the Pismo Pier and danced in the street to  
Billy Joel in front of Splash.

Your shine reflected on the sea as in your smile.

It was high tide and the blur stayed in my eyes awhile.

I felt that I could reach out and grab it and make it my radiance too be-  
cause I think that's what you wanted.

Last year I lost a lot of money line dancing on linoleum floors and buying  
textbooks from odd entities with latent, faded pages that wilted as you  
did.

I stretched them towards the sun in hopes of reviving them.

I felt as if they could lift from my palms and suspend in air.

I only felt more distant from their fading vitality.

I couldn't let go, I won't.

Then I knew why your hand couldn't squeeze mine back,

That pain is deathly.

But we have to be strong enough to be gentle with the certainty of a con-  
cluding paragraph.

The moon was brighter that night with you on the other side.

I smiled and cried from the light, from the dark, at the same time.

This newfound multiplicity of consciousness makes me question who I  
am without you,

You who knew me before sunset.

Now I am stuck in the apprehension of being alive in a world without you  
in it.

In Sally Loo's I listened for the reverberating, audible you in voicemails  
and in strangers.

I tried to pry you from my phone, from the crowd.

But we already buried you like roots so that you could become a flower in  
sublime suburban gardens.

I'm still burying you.

Maybe heaven is a travesty and life a levitation leading to a floating mall.  
There the hot man with the beard will give us a free gift with purchase to  
make up for what we missed together in this life.

But Dad, I am learning to dance in the ebb and flow and pandemonium  
of existence like I said I would.

I will teach you then.

# Stillness Survives Here

## Madison Gonzalez

My dad's hospital trips are now habitual, and I feel much more aware of my adulthood recently. My mother mentioned in passing my brother and father found themselves in the hospital within the same week. Still, I try to grasp onto the pop-up picture book last year living on the central coast life I am supposedly supposed to be existing inside of. I do not let myself cry, as it just wastes time. Instead, I sit and I spin my rings in class, pushing the pearl on the ring four from the right into my middle when I get worried. And I find stillness. Last week while at an art museum in LA I noticed a pair lying overlooking the city. Intertwined on the ground, embraced in one another, embraced by the arms of the grass reaching upward to hug around their silhouettes. Still, sitting, seeing. Stillness survives there.



Seeing a small girl while hiking into melted butter hills, warmed by the sun. And said girl wearing mismatched stripes on top and bottom, peering down at her reflection in the still water reservoir. I find myself wishing to see how her stripes would look in the amber water due to a softness stirred from my admiration of how children dress for what they feel. Sitting on a rock while watching her and overhearing the thump thump thump of a father with a small boy pulling his shoulders, left then right like reins of a horse, shoulders swaying. And the small boy being asked by the father why he is carrying him when he is supposed to be walking and the boy saying because you're my dad. And after, going home and dressing in the white stitched strawberry colored flower coat that makes me feel small enough to fit in an overall pocket. Then calling my dad, telling him I love him-- because he is my dad.



The gap. Between my two front teeth. Between my legs. Between my breasts. Whipped cream would spill when psshed into my mouth after eating all my dinner in childhood. And I would often pull my shirt up to see my stomach in the mirror after eating to make sure it did not grow. Dessert isn't really something that I was ever taught women would be able to eat if they wanted to be in love. Like lollies and love were some push and pull tug a war of lustful indulgence in the grand scheme of it all. But I stand topless as I apply my mascara in my crimson laced lined bra before going out now and I admire the way in which goosebumps polka dot my breasts. I no longer remember how many calories are in a small slice of chocolate cake on my birthday or the bagel I eat every morning. Opening and closing doors, the gaps of my full body allow it to live a full life.



Having friends willing to dress up in glittery gowns for tipsy travels to bookstores and also allow time for Friday night green velvet couch sitting with apple cider and watching films about love. And feeling closeness in diners and intimacy through exchanges in poetry read to one another to share things that are sometimes otherwise too hard to say aloud. Putting picnic blankets out on bedroom floors for eating soup and painting boxes as a place for moments to be held until ready to be retouched and allowing a comfortable silence to exist out of a mutual appreciation of the still sanctuary that friendship provides. And feminine love found in giggling getting bangs cut in college science building bathrooms while sitting on the ledge of the sink. Cold sterile scissors that are usually used for cutting bandages curtain my eyes enough to see closeness in my life, like the distance between bowling seats.



The time after it rains where leaves hold water in their palms and the cement looks like my glittered eyeshadow. The trees wear richer greens and the sky blueberry. All the windows look like sea glass coated in condensation and I can't help but think of my mother and her adoration of the opaque glass. Glass that we would spend hours raking fingers feeling for in the sand of Southern California all my childhood. And feeling like the water held by leaves laying with my cheek cupped by a boy. My finger tracing, leaving love letters on his wrist. Laying in a certain type of silence that can only exist when two people are touching yet have not talked about what it will mean after it ends. Laying while the condensation on my window melts away with the night. The sun speckling, rain droplets racing around the rim of my window, like his finger summing each notch of my spine.



Driving down the 101 seeing a man standing sideline to the road lips flopping singing and strumming and waiting for the rest of the world to listen in. And a cow stands close to the man entranced in the love letter being sung for the earth. Big Sur lives as a refuge. Land which lives with art and humanity and literature in the dirt and the light that wraps its fingers between the needles on trees like hands being held for the first time. And Big Sur is banana coffee and poetry written on napkins and the creases on my forehead softening. It is where sand tickles between toes and cliff-sides create human statues, still staring outward as if not moving pauses the spinning Earth in its orbit. Jack Kerouac's golden and eternal place.



Mourning moments that might not ever happen as illness enters my life like Kool-Aid powder into my clear water world. Tears drip without my awareness as I hear the wind talk to the trees as it weaves in and out and I walk through campus in silence now. My friend's thumbs pick tears off my face. And life isn't Sunday morning breakfast pancakes and my dad

reading me novels before bed about fairies fighting dragons, but love is. And at night I envision my dad walking me down the aisle to my blue banister and white weathered wood stain glass windowed future, where I will live with my lifelong love. Sunday mornings full of singing and swinging and saying all the things we adore about one another even when arguing. And only allowing frustration to live only for an instant as it only takes up space amongst the love that lives in all the moments of my life. Holding still, letting it all wash over me as I am immersed in my humanity each day. Stillness survives there.

## Desert Cottontail Ears Isaac Rudnick



## Considerations on a Grecian Statue of a Lost Man Po Johnson

In bogs, there are frogs;  
Frogs sometimes are found in bogs;  
Bogs and frogs contrast?

# The Award

## Tiffany Lerfald

Professor Clark King swatted an indignant mosquito that hovered past his beard and felt its warm guts smear his cheek. It was the eighteenth one that had landed on him today during his exhausting trek through the Amazon. Trailing after him, his graduate assistant Oscar Jones smiled at every leaf and specimen, and their Brazilian guide Sergio brought up the rear carrying the professor's camera equipment, a pack containing his scientific apparatus, and the lanterns. Oscar was entrusted with shouldering the sleeping rolls, a knapsack full of foodstuffs, and the tents.

Although the sun was partially hidden behind the clouds, the humidity still managed to invade, and by noon, the sleeves of their khakis were slick with sweat. As soon as they neared a steep overlook, Clark called for a halt and stood panting at the edge.

From his small, personal pack, he retrieved his diary and began to log his progress.

*September 12th, 1889*

*We approached the Amazon Basin today and the weather looks promising. According to my research, my team and I should encounter the *Morpho menelaus* in great numbers by the falls and streams. That is, if Jones doesn't scare them all away. The Museum of Natural History will certainly reward me for providing them with this glorious edition to their collection. I can only imagine Professor Hill's face when he realizes how dull his Saharan Dung Beetle research will be in comparison! He may think he's deserving of his titles, but I happen to know more about lepidopterology than the entire department at Oxford. We'll just see whose discovery the museum chooses to honor.*

Following Clark's shaky scrawl, the pen deposited a splat of ink at the end of the page, as if to finalize the statement. Satisfied, Clark put the diary away and stroked his beard methodically.

"Jones," he called, as he gazed down into the lush riches of the basin below. "Fetch my spyglass."

Oscar hobbled over and nearly dropped the glass, but Clark snatched it from him before such an unfortunate event could occur. Then he pressed it to his eye and ran his tongue over his teeth.

"Yes," he breathed. "There. We must head down if we are to find the *Morpho menelaus*. Just imagine my prize pinned to the wall of the Museum of Natural History. And underneath, a plaque with my name..."

Oscar followed the professor's gaze into the dense jungle below. He stood a head taller than Clark and was probably the only young man in Oxford who didn't don a mustache. He scratched his head. "You mean the blue morpho butterfly?"

Clark sighed. "As I said. We mustn't dally now."

Oscar bounced along after the professor and joined Sergio, who pointed at Clark's unfettered back and laughed. Huffing and puffing, they made the taxing descent down the cliff, smacking wet leaves in their path and clearing vines. The floor teemed with life: ants, beetles, worms. Insects that looked like sticks, leaves, and bark. Mantids of vibrant blues and pinks.

Clark plodded through, often consulting his timepiece, but Oscar gaped in wonder at everything that moved. Just then, he knocked his face against a tree trunk and came face to face with a fuzzy spider.

"Oh!" Oscar gasped. "Look, Clark, I think I found a rare tarantella! I bet Oxford would love to have a specimen like this in their museum."

The commotion brought Sergio over who peered at the spider and began speaking to Oscar with excitement in his eyes. Oscar then called out to the professor.

"Sergio says that this is a very special tarantula!"

Clark sagged his shoulders and sighed. Then with reluctance, he joined them by the tree and squinted at the hairy creature crawling

leisurely up the trunk. It had bright orange bands on the legs and giant pedipalps, but Clark paid little interest to it.

“Jones,” he began, lowering his eyelids, “I believe I’ve made it perfectly clear that you are to address me as Professor King.”

Oscar squirmed. “Right! Sorry, Cla-Professor. But I think we’ve found something! Sergio says that very few people have seen this spider. It must be rare. He suggests presenting the tarantula to Oxford since it’s a real beauty.”

Clark gazed for another short spell at the object in question, then replied, “That’s only a Brazilian Wandering Spider.”

“But how do you know it’s not a rare species?”

A smirk began to play at the corner of Clark’s mouth. “Jones, the world is full of rare species, but only a true scientist can discern what is rare and what is...*common*.” Clark flicked his hand in the spider’s direction in illustration of his point. “Now let’s be off.”

Oscar shrugged off his pack and began rummaging inside for a mason jar with his long arms. He twisted off the lid and angled the jar so that the palm-sized spider could crawl inside.

Clark spun around. “What are you doing, Jones? We didn’t come here for spiders! I told you it’s only a common species.”

“Says who?” asked Oscar as he sealed the lid tight and peered at the specimen inside. His eye became giant in the glass and Clark huffed.

“Well...Queen Victoria, that’s who! Now let’s hurry. The day’s wasting.”

They set on their way and as evening crept in, the first drop of rain began to fall. What started as a light drizzle soon escalated into a thunderous downpour. Pools of water collected in their hats and gushed down into their faces like rivers.

“Damn,” said Clark. He started to yell over the uproar to pitch the tents, but the travelers were already soaked before the first peg was hammered into the ground. An hour later, they crammed themselves under the leaky tarps and Clark began to write in his journal.

*September 12th, 1889*

*A particularly trying day. By some sheer luck, I managed to come across a case of butterfly eggs on the underside of a Ficus leaf, so I gathered them onto a slide and had Jones analyze them. I searched the area in vain for a sign of the parents, but I didn’t see so much as an antenna all day. When I returned, I asked Jones if he would confirm his readings, but that buffoon only told me that the slide was dirty and that he had wiped it against his shirt! I can tolerate our guide, but to be saddled with that ham-handed Jones is just more than I can bear! If he isn’t breaking something, then he’s either scaring away the fauna or ruining our dinner. I must say he’ll be sorely disappointed when he finds that silly spider of his to be nothing more than a common specimen. I shall have to notify Oxford of his incompetence. A chap like that will never be a true scientist.*

While Clark furiously scribbled under the lantern light, Oscar took out his own journal and began to follow suit.

*Tuesday, bright and sunny.*

*It was a fantastic day! I better take some notes. We saw lots of colorful insects and pretty leaves. The jungle is just teeming with plants and animals. Clark went off to look for his butterfly and left me in charge of his microscope, so I thought I better clean it off a little. I think Clark was a little stressed today because he yelled at me and sent me away to help Sergio with dinner. I was in charge of mixing the soup, but I thought it could use a little flavor. I didn’t know what the red powder in our pack was, but when Clark began coughing and sneezing, I guess it was a little too spicy for him. I’m really fascinated by Clark’s beard. He sure keeps it trimmed as if it were a hedge or something. He always has his mirror and scissors handy in case a bug gets in there. And speaking of bugs, I found a great big spider today. Sergio says it’s a rare species, and I’m sure he knows plenty about the Amazon. Maybe I’ll name it Stripes.*

When morning came, Clark ordered the others to pack up camp for an early start. While Oscar and Sergio folded the soaked tents, Clark checked his hand mirror for any imperfections in his beard. A few stray hairs stuck out in defiance, earning a prompt snip from his scissors. Once, he thought he heard Oscar inquire for a hand with the supplies but dismissed the noise as a howler monkey. Twenty minutes behind schedule, Sergio led the group to a cliff wall with a petulant Clark tapping his timepiece in frustration. Covering the giant wall was a sea of scarlet macaws. Oscar observed their brilliant feathers in awe—bright blues, vibrant reds, bold yellows. They picked at holes in the rock with their beaks, squabbling and fussing among each other.

“Oh, look, Clark!” Oscar pointed. “Look at the birds!”

The minute Clark looked up, a shrieking cloud of scarlet fluttered over him. Dozens of parrots squawked in a frenzy, flapping their wings noisily over Clark’s head.

“Ahh!” the professor cried, waving his arms to deter the birds. He dropped his spyglass and ducked low to the ground, covering his face. “Get away! Get them away!” he cried, thrashing in the grass as the parrots swooped low toward him. Suddenly, a streak of white sailed down and splattered his shoulder. The parrots circled around a final time before settling down again in the rocks.

Sergio and Oscar guffawed at the show, each holding their sides from laughter. Finally, Clark tottered to his feet and fumbled for his spyglass, looking pale and harried. “Blast it, Jones! Stop that infernal laughter. If only Hill could have been cursed with you as an assistant, then my life would have been much brighter!”

Oscar’s smile shrank a bit. “What have you got against Professor Hill, anyway?” he asked. “Weren’t you two colleagues since childhood?”

Clark glanced at his stained shoulder and wrinkled his nose. Then he dusted himself off, trying to appear collected. “Colleagues, yes. But friends...that Hill has been my enemy since public school!”

Sergio nudged Oscar and the two began chatting exclusively with private glints in their eyes. Then Oscar addressed the professor. “Sergio wants to know why you keep mentioning this ‘Hill.’”

Clark sighed heavily. “He’s always been against me! When we were ten, young Thomas Hill decided it would be ever so peachy to pilfer the answers for our arithmetic examination. He tricked me into entering the teacher’s study and stealing the exam questions. When Master Williams found out, Hill feigned complete innocence and blamed me for the prank. I got caned so many times on my back that I couldn’t lie down for a week! And that isn’t all. Last year, I submitted a research article to the Lepidopterology Department about the life span of *Morpho menelaus* and was declined. They informed me that they were not taking any more submissions. Then the next day, I saw Hill’s article on butterfly migration patterns featured in the paper! His specialty is beetles! It was a deliberate scheme to undermine my success as a research professor. What does Hill know about butterflies?”

“I thought you and Hill both studied all kinds of insects,” said Oscar.

Sergio chuckled beside him, finding amusement from the professor’s distress.

“I’ll tell you one thing, Jones,” said Clark, pointing a finger in his direction. “I’ll not let Hill keep me from success this time. I’ll find that butterfly and I’ll show Oxford what an asset I am!”

The weeks passed with little success. Each day, the professor’s fits grew longer and larger in number, and their supplies started to dwindle. But amidst the scores of insects, there were still no butterflies to be found.

Clark spent the morning tending to his beard on the basis that a great scientist had to look his best no matter where he was. It was while he was trimming the left side that Sergio came crashing through the underbrush toward their camp, waving and shouting in Portuguese.

Clark looked up from his hand mirror, his scissors poised to snip a few longish hairs on his chin. “What’s he saying, Jones?” he asked.

Sergio repeated himself with urgency and Oscar translated, jumping up and down in excitement. “He says there’s a blue butterfly! He says to follow him, quick!”



Clark flung down his things, grabbed a butterfly net, and took off running like a schoolboy. He swung the net around as if it were a lance, filling the jungle with its swooshing noises. “Jones, pack up camp and follow me!” he called over his shoulder.

Clark trampled through ferns and swatted at vines that curled around his arms and legs. A twig stabbed him in the eye, but he didn’t stop for breath. Sergio led him further and Clark stumbled over a log. His shirt snagged on a protruding branch, earning a long rip across his torso. Still, he pressed onward through the growth until he lost sight of Sergio completely.

There, fluttering just ahead of him was a brilliant, blue butterfly. Clark never took his eyes off the creature. When it flew to the right, Clark staggered toward it. When it veered to the left, the professor followed in its path. He was soon twirling in circles, the jungle engulfing him in a dizzying swirl. His heart raced. He caught sight of the butterfly once more and advanced upon it. And then the ground fell away beneath him.

Clark tumbled down and down, smashing against the protruding rocks and plummeting into the gorge below. Groaning, he cradled his left leg. It felt broken.

He laid there in agony until Sergio and Oscar descended into the gorge after him.

“What happened, Professor?” Oscar asked. He poked at Clark’s bad leg, earning a sharp cry from his touch.

“What do you think happened?” Clark growled. “Help me up.”

Sergio and Oscar each took an arm, but as they began to lift, Clark let out another cry of anguish and Sergio gestured to the forest floor.

There in the soil, the smashed blue wings of a butterfly fluttered their last, then went still. Clark scooped up the specimen and brought it to his face.

“My prize,” he breathed, and began to weep.

For a while, the party stood in silence as they listened to Clark’s whimpering. Then Oscar looked carefully at the butterfly. “Are you sure that’s the blue morpho?” he asked.

Clark gazed upon the crumpled specimen. The wings had only been slightly bent, but half an antenna was missing, and the abdomen was crushed. Still, it was blue and brilliant.

“Yes, yes,” Clark said, rubbing his eyes against his sleeve. “This is the blue morpho. You can see by the shape of the antennae.”

“Well, they look pretty smashed to me,” said Oscar with a scratch of his head.

Clark harrumphed. “I said it’s the blue morpho. Now I don’t have time to dispute with you about my knowledge. The boat leaves tomorrow. Tell Sergio that we’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

Amid the rich exchange of Portuguese that ensued, Clark unscrewed a mason jar and sealed the butterfly inside.

“Sergio says that you should find another butterfly,” said Oscar. “Maybe one that’s not so... smashed? And he suggests-”

“There’s no time to look for a better one!” Clark growled. “I came for the blue morpho and now I’ve found it.” He thought of Professor Hill and his recent dung beetle discovery in the Sahara. The faculty had adored his research. But if there was going to be any award, he was sure that a rare butterfly would upstage a beetle any day. Yes, he was certain that Hill’s discovery would pale in comparison.

Hobbling between Oscar and Sergio, the professor glanced behind him one last time before turning his back on the Amazon for good.

Two weeks later, after the long voyage back to England, Clark observed a crippled man in front of his mirror. The jungle had not been kind to him. But what bothered him most was his beard. No longer abundant and thick, it was now reduced to a scabby patch of hair revealing blotches of his irritated skin. Apparently, some strange insects had laid eggs in his beard which had then hatched and caused infection. But with only a pair of scissors on the ship, Clark was forced to cut off the infected hair, leaving a stubbly mess in their place.

Now, as Clark observed his reflection, his head seemed twice as small without his facial hair. It was not a becoming look for a professor who was about to be rewarded with an honorable plaque. But then, no

sacrifice was too great for science. Clark ran his tongue over his teeth.  
 “Yes. No sacrifice is too great for science.”

Clark glanced at his timepiece as his horse and carriage pulled up to the auditorium. It was half past seven – just a few minutes late. No doubt everyone would be taking their seats soon. Stumbling out of the carriage, the coachman attempted to assist him, but Clark swatted him back with a crutch. Although the hospital had hesitated to discharge him on account of fever and a fractured leg, Clark had insisted that under no circumstances would he miss his very own ceremony.

Hobbling through the crowded foyer on his crutches, Clark spotted Professor Hill looking suave and fresh in his tailored suit jacket and spats. His hair was oiled back, his mustache trimmed to perfection. Even his beard was flawless – thick and symmetrical. Clark scowled when the man approached him. “Hill,” he grumbled.

“Professor King,” Hill said through lowered eyelids. “For a moment I thought we wouldn’t have the pleasure of seeing you tonight. Your usually so punctual. My word, what ever happened to your beard?”

Clark struggled for breath, too affronted to manage words. His first response came out as a bark. Then he composed himself and replied, “I’ve just returned from the Amazon, and in fine condition too, old boy. I do believe my new discovery will shock even you.”

“It looks...infected,” Hill continued, squinting at Clark’s beard. “You might try some camphor for that. Are you planning to stay for the ceremony?”

Clark’s mouth quivered like a fish. He turned away and whacked the auditorium doors open with a crutch.

Minutes later, standing on a platform before the most prestigious men of zoology, Clark leaned on his supports while Oscar’s slender form towered over him. As the curator indulged the crowd with accounts of their Amazonian expedition, the applause lingered on and on, and Clark wondered when Oscar would take his seat among the audience. The crutches dug uncomfortably into his underarms as the professor struggled to stay upright, but he was certain that it was just the excitement

that was making him so nervous. He tried to keep his eyes open, to hold out just a little longer. Just until his award was announced.

From the audience, he caught sight of Professor Hill in the front row, looking smug, self-important, and just a bit envious. He had not been called yet to the podium. Clark waited for his colleague to squirm with jealousy, for the anticipated words to come when the museum would honor Professor King with a golden plaque.

From the podium, the curator’s muzzy words rang like tinnitus in Clark’s ears.

“...and in his dedicated capture of a common, blue butterfly, please give a round of applause for our very own, Professor Clark King.”

Clark chuckled with false modesty from the praise. Sweating, he adjusted his waistcoat and blinked a few times from the limelight overhead. Wait? Had the curator said that his butterfly was...common?

He was certain that he was going to fall any minute. Clearly, he wasn’t hearing things correctly. But as Clark listened, the curator’s next words suddenly froze him cold.

“...I’d like to award this honorable plaque to a brave, determined scientist for the remarkable rare tarantella that we greatly welcome to our collection...please give a hearty round of applause for Mr. Oscar Jones!”

Clark blinked several times. He wasn’t sure if he was still in reality as the coveted plaque passed into Oscar’s large, klutzy hands. The fool smiled stupidly, not knowing what he was getting.

“For me?” Oscar asked. “I won something?”

Clark’s face turned beet red as he started to wheeze.

“Your specimen will be mounted on our wall of spiders and this plaque will be placed underneath in honor of your discovery,” the curator explained. “Congratulations, young man. With more findings like this, you’re likely to become the head of the department one day.”

Clark felt streaks of sweat sliding down his face. How could this be possible? A rare tarantula? How could he misidentify it? Perhaps those orange bands on the legs...Sergio had been right. Oscar had been right! And his butterfly...*common*? His memory reeled him back to the jungle when he had held the smashed specimen in his hands. He recalled

Sergio's words about finding another butterfly. The truth glared before him. He had simply settled for the wrong species!

When he dared a peek at the audience, Professor Hill smiled smugly in triumph. The word was out now: Clark's career was ruined! His name was tarnished! Now everyone would call him a fraud, an amateur. He could never hold his head up in public again!

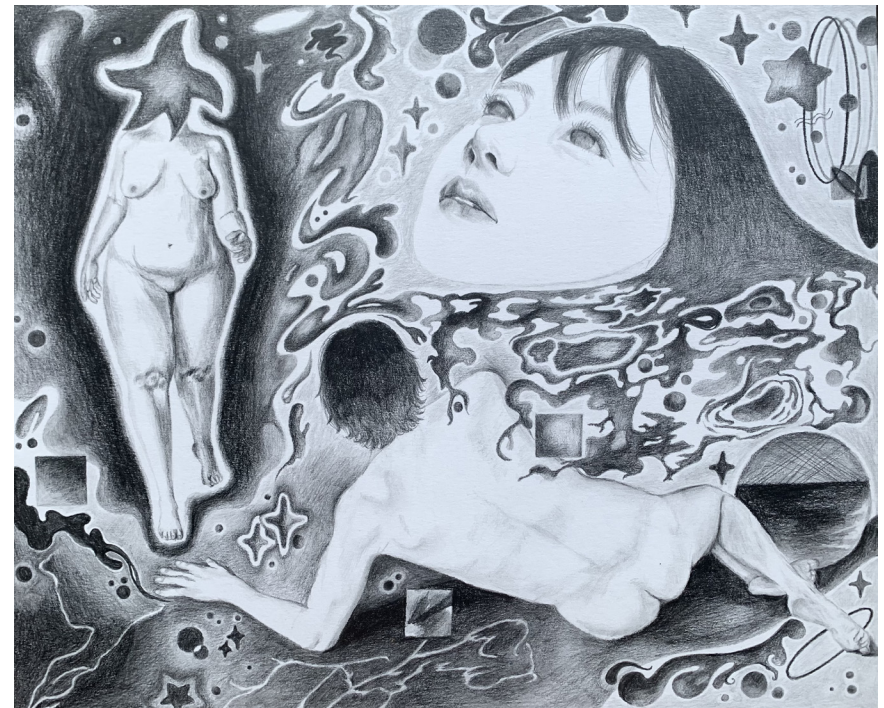
The lights returned to blind him, smudging the auditorium into a blur.

There was a loud gasp from the audience as Clark's crutches clattered on the floor, followed by a deafening thump. The last thing the professor saw was Oscar's long head leaning over him before his eyes shut out the humiliation.

## Untitled

2022. Graphite on bristol. 17 in. x 14 in.

Josie Doan



# Blood and Smoke

## Jade Stankowski

FADE IN:

INT. GARCÍA MANSION - ENTRANCE - EVENING

SUPERIMPOSE: MADRID. SEPTEMBER 13, 1923.

Emilio de Gogorza's "In Old Madrid" plays.

A house that epitomizes old money. Hypnotic ART DECO TILES that make the grand entrance seem infinite. Velvet tapestry and gilded furniture that would be kitsch if it wasn't so expensive.

AN ANTIQUE, HAND-PAINTED, CIRCULAR LACQUER MIRROR that takes up half the wall. A winding STAIRCASE draped with a SPANISH SAVONNERIE CARPET and lined with 14-karat gold balusters.

VICENTE GARCÍA (40), a member of parliament in a pinstripe suit, slouches in a red armchair and smokes a CUESTA-REY CIGAR, savoring every whiff.

The front door SLAMS open. He looks in the mirror and sees the reflection of THREE MEN in black military uniforms. His eyes widen.

LUIS SANZ TORRES (military officer, 50) and TWO SOLDIERS march into the house. Luis's leather trench coat and red-collared military tunic separate him from his martial inferiors. The men's footsteps are too synchronized.

Before Vicente can consider resisting, Luis fires his REVOLVER. In the mirror, we see the BULLET penetrating Vicente's brain. Bullseye. The bloody bullet strikes the mirror, SHATTERING it to pieces.

Vicente collapses to the floor. The lit cigar, still perched between his lifeless fingers, doused in blood. His eyes remain wide open, perpetually in shock. SMOKE RISES AS BLOOD POOLS.

Luis walks to the corpse as the soldiers stay locked in place. Luis squats down to Vicente like an adult lowering himself to a child.

LUIS

(to Vicente)

You've been very bad, Vicente.

Luis grabs the cigar from Vicente's lifeless hand. He walks to the shattered mirror and caresses his own face. He takes a long whiff of Vicente's cigar -- Vicente's blood painting his lips red. He exhales. He admires his bloody lips. Licks his lips clean as he walks to the soldiers. The blood is candy to him.

LUIS (CONT'D)

(motioning cigar to SOLDIER 1)

Care for the taste? I'm partial to La Aurora, but I'd never pass up a Cuesta-Rey.

Soldier 1 hesitates but ultimately leans in for a smoke. As his lips near the cigar, Luis flips his hand and lets the cigar's burning end singe Soldier 1's cheek. Soldier 1 flinches.

LUIS (CONT'D)

(to Soldier 1)

Oops.

(to SOLDIER 2)

Go upstairs. Kill anything alive.

INT. GARCÍA MANSION - ANITA'S BEDROOM - LATER

SOLDIER 2 kicks open the bedroom door, his hand clutching a gun. Behind a twin-sized bed with a floral-accented bed frame and baby blue bedding hides ANITA (13), scrawny for her age and wearing a nightgown. She clasps her knees. She doesn't turn to look.

Soldier 2 stops in the doorway, stunned. He didn't expect he would have to kill a child.

SOLDIER 2

Fuck.

ANITA

You broke our mirror.

Soldier 2 fires his gun. "In Old Madrid" ends as we hear a BANG. But where did the bullet land?

CUT TO BLACK.

## The Monster Jack Fowler

He was too lanky. The heroes of old had meat, muscle, maybe a bit of fat: *the works*. What little flesh this one possessed was bottled up in a sturdy suit of armor.. a thick metal shell clinging to emaciated bones, hardly appetizing-- a lot of work and little pay-off for the modern monster on the go. This is not to say that his carapace was particularly well designed, at least not for shrimp like him. The poor bastard was hobbled from the weight, as if he might fall over at any second. I watched him teetering towards the mouth of the cave, stomach gurgling sickly-- a bit of indigestion from the last so-called champion of the people (some gauntlet accidentally left on a hand tends to do that). It was then, Dear Reader, that I decided I would have to be more careful when peeling the rind off this one.

The sad metal cricket creaked closer, tin legs rubbing together broken melodies. Then, unfurling a ratty old banner with a flourish, he squeaked, "Fear me, wicked serpent! I am but a poor man with rusty armament and fractured blade. But I have bravery and love in my heart, and it is known by all righteous men sir, that the pure hearted shall triumph over the dark forces of t-hdbaaaa!"

It seemed that in the shadows of my meager lair a peculiarly shaped boulder had colluded with a badly dented visor to create the illusion of a beast before the poor man. The scraping of my scaly hide along the floor had broken the mirage, and teetering just a bit too far to the side in his shock, my dinner fell to the floor. The fool was now alerted to the true threat of the cave, yet entirely helpless before me.

He rolled back and forth on the floor in an attempt to get up. Limbs were flailed, tears were shed, but his valiant efforts proved vain. I must confess, I could have killed him a hundred times over in the time I watched, but something made me pause. In my many years fighting the

warriors of man I had never seen a would-be monster slayer so incredibly... pathetic. I'll admit I was curious. Was this some kind of joke? Maybe the boy was a distraction, and soon a real warrior would charge in to fight me. Or was his ineptitude merely an act, a wiley trick meant to lull me into a false sense of security, perhaps? Somehow a worse thought crept in...it might just be that humankind no longer feared me enough to really try and get rid of me. It had been decades since I burned down a village, perhaps a hundred years since I last kidnapped a princess. Let's face it friends, I had let myself go.

Pondering this, I hardly noticed when the man finally stopped rattling about the floor. Re-focusing on the task at hand, the man's exhausted gasps clued me in that this was no trick. I was truly facing the lowest caliber of warrior... nay person, they could have sent. I decided I would have to examine the man further to determine the exact extent to which I had been insulted, and so I spun him around to face me. I looked at him and he looked at me... and screamed. That went on for a while. Eventually he quieted, only gently sobbing and I, a centuries old serpent, scarred and stained with blood of innocents and murderers, heroes and villains felt long buried empathy flow through my cold blooded body, warming my blackened heart. In this state he reminded me of myself as a hatchling, trapped by clumsiness in my shell until Mother had pried me loose.

Gently, with great care as to not accidentally sever a limb or two, I used my claws to release him from his unwieldy armament. Clearly confused, he accepted the help without a word. When he struggled to stand, I offered my neck as support and with several moments hesitation he grabbed it, allowing me to coil around him lifting him upright. The man stroked my scales, examining my armor as I examined him without his. He was young, too young for such messy business, and without his "rusty armament and fractured blade" he had naught but a ratty tunic and a knife for skinning game. He was no one of note, a poor boy sacrificed for a people who no longer cared to stand against me. I hugged him close with my neck, and the boy stopped trembling in fear. In my youth I had bathed in the magma seas beneath the earth, and yet in all my years I

never felt warmer than in that moment, and never colder than in the next moment as the shock of a blow numbed my body.

It took a second to realize what had happened, but I felt only the slightest pang of betrayal as the blood gushed from the wound. What was I to expect after all? It's how the stories always go. Today's "hero" stumbled back in shock. No doubt he'd imagined that something as fantastic as I would be immune to a rusted old dagger. Indeed, I had thought the very same thing. It was quick, death stealing the warmth from my blood which I had in turn stolen from the fires below.

"Hero," rasped my dying lungs.

The man responded in turn "Monster".

# an ode to sumo mandarins - 1/1/23 Dana Craighead

we drank ginger ale on the plane  
every girl's nails are painted a shade of burgundy  
the right way to pour tea without splashing  
depends on the teapot

there was a night on the island  
where every star was out  
your words broke the porcelain barrier of my heart  
I will never see life the same

no crackers without cheese  
a mandarin orange fills my heart space  
the hawk flies overhead  
and tells me i'm on the right road

and you, you painted a picture of me  
in the eucalyptus trees  
your love is safe with me  
your arms are the safest place i've ever known

the raven wrapped it's claws  
around the telephone line  
I had to say hello to the feeling of the universe  
I had no choice but to smile

and you, my friend  
shattered my soul, my realistic temptations  
could I even call it love  
when you took my kindness for granted

i'll never see the trees the same  
where my happiness brought me to tears  
to be holding you so innocently  
i'll drive off the edge before I forget this

the raven does not leave me  
she watches me eat my mandarins  
she waits for the day I surrender  
she waits until I allow myself peace

but I will never forget the day the island was alive  
or the day we spent in the eucalyptus trees  
or the day he carefully laid his head to rest on mine  
or the way the mandarin fills my heart space.

how can I surrender to the raven  
knowing my memories shred my eyes  
dimly lit, my days are  
in comparison to these.

**-dana craighead**

## 878 to Jangles

Gavin Hart

I'm drifting.  
878 million miles  
from where MeeMaw last hugged me.

Vigor of a young cadet  
has long since sweat off  
with the smoke  
in this hotbox  
I call a cockpit  
—a cosmonaut—  
dancing the ever-drift  
of the void.

MeeMaw, if you so happen  
to see this, my hydrogen tank has combusted  
and I'm leaking a white stream  
into the abyss,  
but  
two more rotations  
and I might pass a spot  
that'll slingshot  
me from Saturn,  
878 million miles  
from these ice debris  
planes of rings—  
home.

I'm thinkin' I just might make home before breakfast—  
warped and withered with wax wings  
engulfed high by inferno  
as I plunge  
a baker's dozen-and-a-half-K miles  
towards them brine blue arms for an embrace;

I'm thinkin' I just might make home before lunch—  
eat a big ol' cinnamon roll

—pippin' hot and fresh—  
not a powder or a packet,  
and listen to some vinyls  
—not these mind-megaphones in my ears  
but some vinyls—  
something that won't shut out  
the sounds of the rhythms all around;

and how do you say?  
Birdsong,  
hear some vinyls and birdsong,  
and jazz,  
and a pan fryin',  
and jangles  
—what we used to call windchimes  
on the avocado farm—  
listen to the two-hundred acres of leaves  
come home with the winds  
that reel the western in—  
and day,  
I'd wake up to see day,  
with a big ol' pippin' hot fresh cinnamon roll;

I'm thinkin' I just might make home before dinner—  
play stump with the boys and brews  
and the dogs makin' rounds by those  
enjoyin' the fire—  
and cook ol' Piggly,  
make some tacos and lemonade out back,  
hear the jangles and the jazz and the birdsong  
and...  
and the laughs—gather everyone 'round the fire and  
let the night do her thing;

we'll wrap the lil's ina quilt from  
a grandma they'll never know  
—that's okay, that'll be okay—  
MeeMaw will fill them with stories anyway,  
and let the night do her thing;

while we pass around the mason jar  
of homemade knocktane,  
I can point up to the night sky,



show the lil's those cosmos  
I crossed, long ago  
—at some point, at some time—  
and all the while,  
let the night do her thing;

see time works  
a lil differently out here  
in these Saturnian rings,  
but I'm thinkin' I  
just might make it home  
and see the real thing  
—the lil's and the jangles,  
avocado acres and birds mid-sing—  
and then,  
only then,  
shall I let the night do her thing.

## Second Astrophotography Dune Isaac Rudnick



# Digging Into The Void

Shelby Anderson

When the sun goes down,  
the stifling silence reminds her  
that *before him*,  
she stood on level ground,  
because she never let herself fall  
too deep.

She longs for him in the shadows:  
*He cares for me*, she whispers.  
A sneaker presses down on the shovel, digging deeper,  
removing more of her,  
oblivious to the cavernous hole  
that grows inside her chest.

Isolation is much worse when  
he stands so close to her;  
she hears the scrape of the spade  
against crumbling dirt.  
Falling to her knees, she cries out,  
*Why won't you help me?*

Running her long fingers through damp dirt,  
she excavates memories that  
are buried beneath the surface  
with thick grass growing on top.

She claws at the soil,  
hands stained with mud,  
fingernails caked with Earth,  
a throat full of nails,  
tired from calling out, *save me*.

She watches for him  
to block the sunlight above,  
to hear his laugh overhead,  
to have him tell her  
*everything will be okay.*

She waits for him  
to throw down a rope to climb out,  
to save her from this muddy chasm,  
but he never comes to shatter the silence,  
and she sinks into the mud.  
Her ragged fingers and  
crumbling thoughts are terrible company.

Hands calloused and full of splinters,  
she holds the wooden shovel  
in her own hands,  
digging further into the Earth.  
She is drunk on the humid air and the idea  
that he could ever fill the hole  
that she dug for herself on the day  
she began to depend on him  
to fill the void within.

*Why is she nostalgic for a future that will  
never arrive?  
"Because that which will never come again  
is what makes [love] so sweet."*

# Inhumation

## Sam Mosteller

Sylvia H. Parsings, Ph.D

East Coast Journal of Anthropological Science

November 8th, 1989

*The subject of burial rituals is one that I'm sure many of my colleagues have strident opinions on. "Aberrations of Mourning", while certainly a seminal work by M. Jacobs, loses itself in Freudian self-satisfaction in such a way that individual cases are entirely disregarded in favor of wild generalizations. (Really, Michael, did anyone edit this?) There can be wide variation from cultural norms that still ultimately adhere to universal truths, I'll admit, and Jacobs does well in his connection of past and future. Yet, his assertion that cultural deviations are always maladaptive and serve no purpose is one that I take issue with.*

*Firstly, who is to say that the modern norm is the perfected one, simply because it is modern? Many have this idea that cultural progress is a perfectly linear line, forever sloping upward. We apply this to our death practices as well. We see the way we treat our dead as the most rational and scientific, the most civilized. Those who follow my work will likely know of my particular interest in the post-civil war death industry, and subsequently the emergence of modern embalming in funerary practices. I'd ask that you allow me, weary reader, to subject you once again to this fascination of mine.*

*Before the epoch of the mortuary sciences, it was the deceased's family that prepared the body for burial, no strange doctors needed. The preservation of the corpse only became necessary when having to transport it a great distance. Decomposition can set in as early as 24 hours after death, and this is typically not a boon to open-casket funerals. During the civil war, young entrepreneurs realized there was*

*a great business to be had in a service that could preserve the physical memory of the deceased. The US at the time wasn't lacking in families wanting their sons back in one piece, and so embalming became standard practice.*

*Something that appeared concurrently with the rise of embalming was the national fear of being buried alive. It was almost a mass hysteria, there are even a few notable instances of individuals installing bells and pulley systems in their caskets, on the off chance they were put in the ground prematurely. Genuine rates of premature burials are tricky to quantify, but almost assuredly slim.*

*Nevertheless, it did happen on occasion. One particular instance I'd like to highlight is the peculiar case of the Freemont Body. This would have happened around 1922. To preface, the Freemont family were upper-middle class and of muted prominence in the Lancaster area. On February 12, one of the Freemont sons, Martin, died a death whose root cause has been lost to time and paper degradation. (Although, one account listed his death as "a consequence of natural causes.") He was a young man of only 25 and an inheritor to the family's meager fortune.*

*It is important to note that the Freemont family had a peculiar tradition when it came to their dead. Whenever it became time that funeral arrangements must be made, money shilled out for caskets and newly tailored black dresses, another ritual was carried out. Supposedly, objects of the departed were gathered, mementos, collections, investments. Each guest would bring one of these items to the funeral and right before the deceased was buried, they would take turns placing the items in the coffin along with notes and doomed flower arrangements, jigsawing them into place between embalmed limbs and newly filled wounds. Apparently, the final product could be rather grotesque.*

*An odd practice, if I should be allowed to use the word. Odd due to its topology. There are no other recorded instances of this kind of behavior anywhere in the surrounding region, or even in the Freemont's extended family history going back to the Germanic Middle Ages. Whenever I've told this story during a lecture, I am inevitably asked the question, "why?" It's a reasonable enough inquiry, but my answer*

*has always been that it's impossible to say. Despite the extensive record keeping done by the Freemonts, nothing indicated the cause of this particular compulsion. Exhaustively documented inventories were kept of what items ended up buried where and with whom, yet it's hard to even say when the practice started.*

*So, why did they do it? We can only speculate. Perhaps it made them feel more important than middle class flu carriers from northern Pennsylvania. Perhaps it made them feel like ancient pharaohs, surrounded in death by opulent wealth.*

*Although, this is not why Martin Freemont's burial, in particular, is of interest. No, that would come the following morning, once the screaming had stopped.*

---

February 13, 1922

When his eyes opened, there was nothing. Not one speck of light nor impression of even a shadow. An unnatural dark.

Martin shifted where he lay, unsure of where exactly he was. His bed felt different that morning, was it morning? Surely it was too dark for morning. Why couldn't he remember going to sleep?

Martin began to sit up but within an instant his head hit something hard above him. He quickly shifted from sleepy delirium to a sobering state of awareness. He tried to lift his arm, but found there objects of some kind piled on it, and when he managed to shift some of them aside, the range of motion afforded to him barely made a difference.

His breath quickened, a raging paranoia rapidly taking over. With each stuttering and panicked exhale, Martin's chest collided with whatever hovered above him, constricting his fear tighter and tighter until there was barely space for him to even think.

Surely not, Martin decided. Surely this could not have happened. Martin had heard of this, had read of this, had nightmares of this. This was not something that happens.

Martin clenched his fist and found that his hand wrapped around something that was resting on his palm. He brushed the tips of his fingers across the edges, craning his neck fruitlessly to get a look at the object. It felt like a small bag, velvet and fraying string closing it shut. Martin could feel the impression of what must be coins filling the bag and he recognized it at once. It was his rare coin collection. He'd spent years on it, obsolete half pennies, Spanish gold, West African currency emblazoned with goddesses he didn't recognize. His terror spread to his feet, numbing them uselessly. He felt desperately at the other items they'd left him with.

Oh, mother, he thought, you gave me flowers, already putrid with rot.

Oh, sister, he thought, your handwritten note, pushed behind my molars, the ink bleeding onto my tongue.

Oh, father, he thought, your handgun is digging into my side, likely polished to perfection like it always was. You swore you'd never let me hold it.

Martin knew then, implicitly, without doubt, what had been done to him.

They'd buried him. They'd labeled him as dead and in doing so ensured without a doubt he would be soon.

It started at the base of his throat, something like a noose there around his neck. It clawed up his esophagus, welling up like bile before forcing its way of his mouth. The sound he made was barely recognizable as human. Putrid terror, animalistic denial.

Martin screamed and screamed and screamed. Surely someone would be able to hear him, would realize their mistake and dig him out. He screamed until the soft tissue of his trachea was shredded, as if someone had taken a wire screen to the lining of his throat, until his voice was just another secret lost to the buried dead.

They could not do this to him, he decided, foolishly, seeing as they already had. This was not possible. His body rejected his reality, hands

moving on their own, rising what little inches they could to claw at the lid of the casket.

His family had been kind enough to spring for a silk lined tomb, but in that moment it was just another obstacle for his fingernails to tear through. The fabric ripped under the force of Martin's desperation and when he finally made it past that treacherous layer of comfort, and his fingers made contact with wood, he could not bring himself to stop.

He ripped and clawed at that unyielding barrier for hours, or for days, or for years. What is time to a corpse? He tore until his fingernails were ripped from their beds like sleepless, stolen orphans, falling from his hands to join the other mementos he had been cursed with in death.

The fact that he couldn't even feel the pain of this self-mutilation is what caused Martin to finally halt in his flailing. His breath caught, sinking into his chest. Why could he not feel the pain?

What kind of person does not feel pain? Martin's mind quickly spiraled, conjuring images of examination tables and formaldehyde.

Surely someone would have had to confirm that he was dead before they put him in the ground. His family would have paid to have him embalmed, so that when they placed the dahlias and coins around his body the effect was less grotesque and more aesthetically pleasing.

Embalmed.

Martin pressed his naked fingers together. He could feel the grooves of now-missing nails and newly acquired splinters but when he forced the shards of wood deeper into his thumb the fluid that rushed to meet the air was not blood.

A smell reached Martin's nose. Mingled in with the heavy scent of dirt and stale air was a distinctly chemical odor.

Something started leaking from Martin's eyes, running down his sunken cheeks and onto his lips, he stretched his tongue out to taste it, to confirm if a dead thing could cry. He pushed his tongue past garbled bits of paper and metal stitches only to meet the taste of formaldehyde and methanol, a notably inhuman compound.

Martin gasped, a metallic sound. He felt the embalming fluid sloshing around between his tissue, his blood long replaced through the

trocar-burrowed hole at the center of his chest, a leaking crucifixion. His tongue pressed at what felt like bits of broken chicken wire and he was suddenly overcome with the foolish, deeply human need to confirm. It is not enough to believe something terrible to be true, he must feel it for himself with his own frigid hands.

The corpse of what was once Martin Freemont struggled to lift his hands to his mouth but the confines of the coffin prevented the natural bend of his arms. Terror taking over, he forced his own body to conform to the desperation of his mind, pulling his shoulder out of its socket and scraping his broken phalanges across the coffin's sides, deforming the limb just enough for him to press his hand into his open mouth.

He felt with oozing fingers past his lips and pressed down on each individual tooth, feeling his way until he made contact with a sharp, broken edge of metal wire which opened a cut on his finger, dripping fluid down Martin's throat.

In the process of his embalming his jaw had been sewn and wired shut. An elegant silencing. A creature not meant to speak again, but the force of Martin's terrified screams had snapped the wire, shredding the inside of his mouth but allowing his voice to escape its secondary tomb. This desecration without him even noticing the pain.

More and more signs of his faltering humanity made themselves known to Martin. He forced his hands up into his nasal cavities, through his ears, behind his eyes. Clawing, tearing, merging features together all because he was trying to find his breath. He was hyperventilating around nothing, an empty, jerking movement. His blood had become a bleach sterilization, no longer a sign of life. A fleshy Ship of Theseus.

Martin Freemont had been buried, and he had been buried because he was dead. His curse was not that he was mistaken for a corpse, but that he was one, and that for a brief moment his soul had reconnected with something that was no longer himself, was no longer a human. Martin had possessed himself and there was no one but the worms to bear witness to this perversion.

The corpse attempted to scream again but its throat had filled with embalming fluid, and it found itself horrified that it could not even choke.

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*In any case, the watchman on duty that night found the sounds coming from Martin's grave to be incredibly disturbing, but he ultimately reported to his supervisor that a raccoon or some other animal had mistakenly been trapped in the coffin when it was buried. When questioned by a local newspaper years after the discovery, the watchman apparently never considered that the sounds he heard that night could have come from a human being, apparently there are some sounds people can make and those they simply cannot.*

*Much to the cemetery owner's dismay, the rumor of the trapped animal in Martin's grave made it back to his family and they demanded that his coffin be exhumed and the creature removed. It seems that it wouldn't do to have the shrine they buried him with be ruined by some rodent or possum.*

*From here there are varying accounts of what happened when the lid of the casket was removed. The most prolific being that every single member of the Freemont family simultaneously fainted upon seeing what had become of Martin, but I find this highly apocryphal. I was lucky enough to be able to sit down with Martin's granddaughter some years ago after attending a rather excruciating presentation on Germanic crypt practices at Amherst college. (Honestly, Michael, four hours is a disturbing amount of time to talk about scapula fragments.) While she was only seven years old at the time she told me the events of that day stick out clearly in her memory.*

*According to her, the family, after prying open the lid, found themselves looking at an impossible contortion of limbs. Martin's legs were crushed into each other, his torso twisted on the axis of its spine like a corkscrew, his mouth had become a gaping wound that stretched over half of his face. She said the first thing that she registered, even when confronted with this gruesome sight, was the smell. Decay and methane, she told me, so pungent it made her eyes water.*

*She told me his body looked like it was trying to murder itself.*

*Dramatics aside, the modern scientific consensus is that the embalming process that Martin underwent was rudimentary at best, and before that he was prematurely pronounced dead.*

*Although, to this day that is not what the Freemont family seems to believe. The granddaughter refused to comment on this theory and when I asked her what happened to the body once they exhumed it, she told me something odd. She said that no one spoke, not even one gasp. Then, soundlessly, Martin's mother stepped forward and removed a jeweled brooch from her clothes and crouched down to place it into the elongated maw of the thing that was once her son. The granddaughter said that she still sometimes thinks of that image when trying to sleep, polished rubies glittering in that vacuous space along with dripping saliva and carved fangs.*

*One by one, the remaining family members approached the corpse and left pieces of themselves, rebuilding the shrine, pressing scarves into crevices of flesh, smoking pipes through faulty bone marrow, thimbles to replace lost fingernails. They made a new list, another inventory.*

*The lid of the casket was nailed shut and the corpse of Martin Freemont was buried for a second time. Apparently, that was that. When the granddaughter saw my look of surprise, she couldn't understand it. To her, I suppose, this was the most logical thing to do with the body. Perhaps it's my investigative tendencies, but I really can't imagine not trying to find out exactly what happened to him, whether he awoke and spent his final moments in grueling terror or not.*

*It can't actually be known for sure what happened to Martin in the twelve or so hours he was in the ground. It really might have just been a racoon. Still, one has to wonder if it was the burying itself that was the villain in this story and not death. Perhaps, if he had not undergone embalming he wouldn't have sustained such pronounced injuries and could have survived long enough to be exhumed.*

*Progress can be maladaptive, as oxymoronic as it may seem.*

*Although, admittedly, I've become much more inclined to investing in one of those pulley systems myself now. Just to be safe.*

# Everything in California Looks Like a Mausoleum

Brigitte Kime

Palm trees mark gravestones  
like flowers  
lining the sidewalks of casket-sleepers:  
they live among us  
feeding off the abundant sun rays  
that bleach our bones  
and here on the West Coast  
the sea salt drenches our skin  
like embalming,  
only temporarily stalling the cost  
of driving fast red cars  
on highways with ocean views  
chasing the hyphenated yellow lines  
on the 405—  
and the happy, gorgeous, tan people  
that are supposed to reside  
here on the West Coast:  
days go fast, dry and bright—  
photo ops define the cliff  
that we have driven over.

# Hungover

Jade Stankowski

FADE IN:

INT. VIVIAN'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - DAY

Akin to John Everett Millais' painting Ophelia:

A young Chinese woman floats in a half-filled bathtub. This is VIVIAN (21, she/they). Her black hair and short white cheongsam mingle with floating flowers. Mascara-smeared eyes and chapped lips ajar. She HUMS -- a subtle, chilling, unconscious tune.

Beside the tub lies a cracked iPhone and a pile of crushed beer cans. The phone RINGS, drowning out their humming. RINGGGG. Her eyes flash open. She VOMITS, missing the toilet and covering her phone in puke.

VIVIAN  
(wiping her mouth)  
Fuck.

Vivian shivers as she lifts herself out of the tub. She massages her hungover head.

FLASHBACK - INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Disco lights illuminate a pack of PARTIERS in neon clothing. Vivian, in her white cheongsam, drunkenly stumbles through the crowd. She's the only person of color in sight.

The crowd watches as Vivian yells at JUNE (21), a white woman with a messy bun that somehow looks chic.

VIVIAN

Fuck you, June. Fuck you, and your family, and your affinity for “Don’t Stop Believing: The Glee version!”

BACK TO PRESENT DAY

INT. VIVIAN’S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - DAY

RING. Vivian snatches her phone off the floor. Puke conceals the caller ID. She puts the phone on speaker.

VIVIAN

June, I’m so sorry. I got way too drunk, and I know that’s not an excuse, and I fucking blew up at you. You didn’t deserve that. I’m sorry.

Phone static.

VIVIAN (CONT’D)

Hello?

CEMETERY SECRETARY answers in a customer-service voice. They’re obviously reading off a script.

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

Hi, Vivian. This is the Prince Albert Funeral Grounds calling.

She shakes off the remaining puke, revealing the caller ID.

VIVIAN

Shit. Um, hi Funeral Grounds.

Vivian spits into the bathroom’s grocery-bag-lined trash can.

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

I’m doing great, thank you.

VIVIAN

I didn’t-

Vivian’s finger hovers over the “End Call” button.

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

I’m calling to inform you that due to the termination of Jade Nyok Choy Mack’s burial grounds lease, the cemetery will be repossessioning her plot next month.

VIVIAN

I’m sorry, what?

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

As the deceased person’s next of kin, you’re entitled to know that the tenant’s upcoming eviction will take place in the following month.

VIVIAN

Eviction? Like, from the ground?

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

The deceased person’s remains will be transferred to the ossuary.

VIVIAN

Ossuary?

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

The tombstone will also be demolished.

VIVIAN

Is that even legal?

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

Under the Grant of Exclusive Right of Burial, our cemetery retains the right to reclaim a plot once the tenant’s hundred-year lease has expired. This way the plot may be repurposed for a new burial.

VIVIAN

So you’re gonna just gonna dig up a grave and bury someone else? That’s allowed?

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

As the tenant’s next of kin-



VIVIAN

This person's been dead a hundred years, right?

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

Jade Nyok Choy Mack was buried in 1923, yes.

VIVIAN

Then I can't be related. My grandparents immigrated in the sixties.

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

You're a Mack, yes?

VIVIAN

On my mom's side.

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

And your mother is deceased, yes?

VIVIAN

God, no! I talked to her yesterday.

Phone static.

VIVIAN

Hello?

CEMETERY SECRETARY (V.O.)

I apologize. It appears I've contacted the wrong descendant.  
Goodbye.

VIVIAN

Wait-

Cemetery Secretary hangs up. Vivian looks in the mirror. Her sopping hair and smudged makeup reflect back at her. *I look like shit.*

## A Pier for Resting Sarah Chayet



## On running

Rebekah Shane

25 cent coin. Candy, banana flavored  
SPF 50 sleeved suit, with a baseball cap.  
catch eyes with the mirror who cringes  
but a quick fuck it, will get me out the door.

From the reeded bellows fly dust, pulled,  
pressed, through the steady slinking, compression  
of cartilage between my feet and the earth  
hugged nearly to death, by strong shoulders of asphalt

Let that jaw wound shut, loose. Listen  
to that crunch. The muscles in my cheeks-  
in my calves as fiber by fiber they unwind,  
slack. We are off now - my body and I

And oh, how viciously itchy our pretzeled skin was  
the last time we were at the zoo. Where from the stroller  
we sat horribly amused, picking at evaporated rocks of sweat  
watching the albino alligator camouflage with concrete

I have never actually watched a lizard lick its eyeball  
but, this couple, on more than one occasion,  
provided me with an overly detailed demonstration  
of what it might look like, if the lizard were half monkey

Speaking of falling in wild love, turns out  
It's not that great, the second time around. At least,  
not in the moments where I find myself back inside  
the fictional future I constructed from the concept of the first.

Feel nothing for a moment. That's alright.  
But when you breathe in the new air, Feel everything.

Let us put ourselves on mute and tune into the universal  
radio station that is local to now

Somewhere along the line, the chords from our breathing  
arrange themselves into a hammock, simultaneously  
strobing smiles of people passing perform open heart surgery  
and the soul is slung sweetly out to the hill sides.

Between two eucalypti, puzzle bark and all  
swaying in time with the twigs of the canopy  
and the song that plays in the credit scene of Nemo.  
we are undoubtedly somewhere "Beyond the Sea"



## the seabirds - 8/8/22 (a diary entry)

Dana Craighead

I feel like dancing, but I have nowhere to dance  
and I feel like writing, but I have no one asking for advice  
I feel hungry but too scared to go upstairs to eat  
I feel lonely but unbelievably happy to be alone

I see a white crane by the water, all alone  
looking for bugs, or fish, or something.  
I see a small fluffy dog, it makes me miss my dog  
don't worry, I'll be home soon

I see two birds flying by. I always see two birds flying by  
they never leave each other's side  
I bet they have the family type of love  
the real type of love.

I see an old sheepdog walking slowly toward me  
he is slow, old, and loving.  
"don't scare the big dog, Rosie," a woman says to her french  
bulldog  
And Rosie listens.

I like the seabirds. the cranes, the seagulls, the pelicans,  
the little sand birds with long legs  
even the little swallows who build their nests by the water,  
under the docks

I feel silly wanting to jump in the water with them  
when I know the water isn't clean.  
the water feels safer up north  
I prefer the boundaries of home much more.

**-dana craighead**

## Radioactive Neon

Rebekah Lee





# Orange Bat

Rebekah Lee



# CONTRIBUTORS

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

### Noah Ackerman | “Brothers”

Noah Ackerman is an English major in his senior year. He plans on pursuing a career in screenwriting/fiction writing after graduation. Besides an obvious love for movies and reading, he also loves to hike, go to the beach, and thrift shop!

### Tyra Adair | “Oh to Love a Soldier” @tytynicolee on Instagram

Tyra Adair is a second year Animal Science major with a Pre-Vet concentration. She is involved in the hip-hop dance club United Movement and the Black Student Union at Cal Poly, and also does short films and creative photoshoots in her free time. Tyra uses writing as a medium for the emotions she usually can't express. Therefore, she loves sharing pieces like this with the public, where conveying these emotions can make other people more accepting of their own, or at least more willing to share them.

### Shelby Anderson | “Digging into the Void”

Shelby Anderson is a fourth-year English major with a Creative Writing Emphasis and Spanish Minor. She loves to write tragic short stories and poems about growing up and away from the person you used to be. She writes with the goal of her readers seeing a piece of themselves in her work. She enjoys playing piano, rock-climbing, and enjoying the sunshine while drinking smoothies.

### Elizabeth Brown | “That’s Life—They’ve Shut the Door,” “About Annie,” “Medieval”

Elizabeth Brown is a third-year English major graduating in 2024. Elizabeth has always loved writing poetry. However, over the latter half of 2022 she experienced unusually frequent bursts of creative inspiration, so she has submitted some of the poems she has written throughout that period.

### Claire Chan | “HUMAN,” “dermatillomania”

Claire Chan is a fourth-year English major in EPPST & Mast, graduating in 2024. As a first-generation Asian American woman, Claire is both informed and motivated by her hybrid identity. She seeks to infuse her unique experiences into her creative works and aims to continue to emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion in her pursuit of a career in Technical Writing. Claire is also a part of the Technical & Professional Communications Certificate Program.

### Gazelle Chen | “plums”

Gazelle Chen is a fourth-year Business Administration major, graduating this spring with a concentration in Marketing, minor in Linguistics, and certificate in TESOL. She is a member of Phi Sigma Iota, Cal Poly's linguistics honor society, and is currently working on a chapbook of poetry.

### Dana Craighead | “an ode to sumo mandarins - 1/1/23,” “he left early - 3/20/22,” “i felt it in my bones - 4/25/21,” “the seabirds - 8/8/22 (a diary entry)”

Dana Craighead is a third-year Construction Management Major and Dance Minor at Cal Poly. Dance, and all forms of art, have been present in her life since she was young. Empathetic and perceptive, poetry has been a way for her to express her emotional observations throughout her life. She is also a part of the Orchesis Dance Company.

### Jenna Dierkes | “Sognare”

@jennadierkes on Instagram

Jenna Dierkes is a second-year English major and Media Arts minor. Jenna is currently involved in the Women in Film and TV club as the Cal Poly SLO chapter Vice President and is an Editorial Writer for Her Campus.

**Josie Doan** | “Untitled.” 2022. Graphite on bristol. 17 in. x 14 in.

Josie Doan is a fourth-year Art and Design major concentrating in Graphic Design. A lover of breakfast burritos and noise-cancelling headphones, they enjoy iced beverages and staying up into the late hours of the night. They work as a graphic designer for Mustang Media Group and University Advising Retention.

**Adriana Dutra** | “Dear Dad,” “Zoom University,” “In an Artist’s Studio”

Adriana Dutra is a third-year English major graduating in 2024. She loves writing poetry, playing guitar, hiking, cooking, and spending time with friends and family. She grew up visiting the Central Coast and feels so blessed to live, study, and soak up the sun here. Adriana thinks her past and present experiences here inform a lot of her creative writing.

**Willow Faust** | “A Quill for a Letter”

@willowfaust on Instagram

Willow Faust (she/her) is a third-year English major and Art History minor from the Bay Area. She likes cats, tea, and cats at magical tea parties, if there was such a thing. In her free time, she enjoys baking, reading, and watching TV. She’s currently working on a novel project. Willow is also a Gender-Inclusive Gaming club board member.

**Madison Gonzalez** | “Stillness Survives here”

Madison Gonzalez is a fourth-year English major and Photography/Videography minor wrapping up her final year at Cal Poly. As her academic career comes to a close, she has centered her passion around writing poetry. Madison’s writing hopes to share the convoluted and complex emotions inevitable in the human experience. She is also a part of Poly Reps, University Housing, and New Student and Transition Programs.

**Alexandra Hardcastle** | “Garden Spray Bottle”

@hardcastlearts on Instagram

Alexandra graduated from Cal Poly, SLO in 2020 with a B.S. in Biological Sciences and is currently a second-year graduate student studying environmental physiology. She has drawn and painted since she can remember and has always enjoyed observing the beauty of the natural world through both science and art. She is also a part of CPSalsa (Cal Poly Salsa Club).

**Gavin Hart** | “878 to Jangles”

Gavin Hart is a second-year English Major. Gavin takes part in the rodeo team (steer wrestling), as well as the school’s wrestling club. Football, chess, freediving, fly fishing—he enjoys a bit of this and that.

**Po Johnson** | “Considerations on a Grecian Statue of a Lost Man”

Po is interested in writing and trains. He is a city planning major who enjoys the outdoors and exploring the wonders of the world.

**Chloe Keely** | “nike”

Chloe Keely is a first-year English major and Ethnic Studies minor. Chloe is from Milpitas, California and their hobbies include watching movies and playing guitar. Chloe writes to create a little space for themselves, with the hope that people would enjoy taking a self-guided tour there. Chloe is also a part of the Honors Program Newsletter, Phi Alpha Delta, and Moot Court.

**Asmahan Karam** | “The Death of Passion”

**Brigitte Kime** | “Everything in California Looks Like a Mausoleum,” “Heirlooms”

Brigitte Kime is a psychology student at Cal Poly. Reading and writing has been a passion of hers ever since she was a child. She loves writing poetry and hopes to one day become published.

**Ashley Lang** | “The Occupied House”

Ashley Lang is majoring in English and Psychology. Ashley’s hobbies include crocheting, reading and RPG games.

**Rebekah Lee** | “Radioactive Neon,” “Orange Bat

Rebekah Lee wants to be an Outdoor Science teacher! She love video games, comics, cosplay, and the ocean!

**Sydney Lehr** | “Irreparably,” “Wisteria,” “I Don’t,” “Emla”

Sydney Lehr is a third-year English major. They began writing poetry after taking a community college creative writing class in Spring 2022. Most of their poetry focuses on their frustrations of being disabled and queer in a society not made for them. They transferred to Cal Poly as an English major in Fall 2022.

**Tiffany Lerfald** | “The Award”

Tiffany Lerfald is a fourth-year English major. In Tiffany’s spare time, she likes to write science fiction and fantasy. She loves reading different genres, including historical fiction and mystery, because they help generate ideas for stories. Tiffany also enjoys hiking, swimming, tennis, and basketball when she wants to escape from academics.

**Taylor Wendell Lozano** | “Horizons”

Taylor is a Theater Arts major graduating in the spring of 2023, seeking to work as a writer/composer for the stage and screen. Previous projects include his android depression musical “Andy, the Creator,” an anthology about human-AI relationships entitled “Proxima Populi,” and his senior project songs, “Sinking” and “Imposter.”

**Anna Madrugá** | “Fall of the Flaky Pastry Facade”

Anna is a senior Graphic Design major and English minor. She is (predictably) into doing different kinds of art, although right now she’s doing a lot of comic-based projects, which she finds super fun. Anna is 100% a dog person and her mini goldendoodle Sadie is the best baby in the world.

**Sam Mosteller** | “Inhumation”

Sam Mosteller is a first-year Anthropology major and Geography minor. Sam started writing in elementary school in order to make people laugh, now she mainly does it to make them squirm. With a fondness for finger-nail based body horror, she hopes to maybe someday be a playwright if the whole college thing doesn’t work out.

**Janae Pabon** | “One More Drink”

@janae.pabon on Instagram, janae.pabon@gmail.com

Janae is a third-year English major with a Fiction emphasis, graduating in 2024. She’s loved creative writing her whole life, and her favorite genre to write is realistic fiction (hence her piece!). Janae thanks everyone who reads, ponders, and appreciates her story.

**Ian Pines** | “Architechtonic Anthropocene,” “Postmodern Prolepsis: The Gothic Architechtonic”

@ian\_pines on Instagram

Ian Pines is a painter and instructor of art at Cal Poly SLO and Allan Hancock College. Please visit his website—ianepines.com—to see a compilation of Pines’ large oil paintings, smaller works, artist statement, and other writings.

**Isaac Rudnick** | “California Ground Squirrel Carrying Straw for Burrow,” “Desert Cottontail Ears BW,” “Second Astrophotography Dune,” “Spider on a Fig Leaf”

@isaacrudnick on Instagram

Isaac Rudnick is a second-year Computer Science major, graduating in 2025. He enjoys wildlife, photography, cybersecurity challenges, and gaming with friends in his free time. He’s also a part of the Cal Poly Security Education Club, the Cal Poly Photography Club, and PolyCon Tabletop Gaming.



**Rebekah Shane** | “On running”

@b.exicle on Instagram

Rebekah is a fourth-year Biology major at Cal Poly. Her academic interests include conservation, restoration and plant pollinator interactions. She likes to spend her time running, climbing, crocheting, painting, and writing.

**Jade Stankowski** | “On a Rooftop,” “Eviction,” “Baijiu,” “Mother Knows Best,” “Blood and Smoke”

@jadestankowski on Instagram

Jade Stankowski is a second-year English major. She is an aspiring screenwriter from Canada. Jade enjoys writing about her experiences as a Chinese-Polish Canadian woman, and she’s impartial towards trains.

**Maddie Stein** | “Building 10 Women’s Bathroom”

@msteinart on Instagram

Maddie Stein is a fourth-year Graphic Design major. Maddie likes to draw. She also writes for Cal Poly’s sketch comedy team and works at the library.

**Sarina Vachhani** | “Rules of a bored lover”

Sarina is a third-year Business Information Systems major and Creative Writing minor. She currently works as a venture capital/private equity intern. In her free time, Sarina enjoys reading, writing, rock climbing, hiking, yoga and eating Vietnamese or Italian food. She hopes you enjoy her piece!

**Joshua Venz** | “Mandy”

Joshua Venz is a fourth-year Materials Engineering major. He has been writing for the past 10 years, a hobby which he is grateful to have been able to pursue alongside his engineering curriculum. What he loves most about storytelling is the ability to gain perspective and insight into the nature of things, like finding beauty in the ordinary.

**Elsie Wordal** | “Sea Turtle”

Elsie is a third-year Spanish major who likes to make ceramics and paint, mostly watercolor and ink drawing of animals and some landscapes.

# EDITORS

## EDITOR BIOS

### Noelle Amey | “I Know Why Jealousy is Green”

Noelle Amey is a fourth-year English Major at Cal Poly with a love for novels and a passion for business. After graduation she will pursue a Masters Degree in Marketing in hopes of one day working for a top publishing house. Currently, Noelle works in the marketing department for Jay Nolan Community Services. She worked as an editor and publisher for *Intertidal* as a part of her senior project, and has loved the experience it provided. She enjoys reading, writing, sports, and traveling the world. Soli Deo Gloria.

### Patrick Ashman

Patrick Ashman (he/him) is a third-year English major also pursuing a Spanish minor and a technical and professional communications certificate. On the rare occasion that he isn't wading knee deep through an assigned novel or literary analysis essay, you'll find Patrick engaging in some of his favorite pastimes such as running/hiking, freestyle rapping, and having meaningful conversations. Although Patrick is still formulating his post-graduation plans, he intends to do some sort of work that has a meaningful impact on the lives of others.

### Yvonne Bee

Yvonne Bee (she/hers) is a third-year English Major with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies, graduating early. She is involved with ASI Student Government, Gender Equity Center, and serves on all three CLA committees. Her most notable work is editing *Byzantium* no. 31 and *sprinkle* vol. 8, and designing OWN vol. 7 and vol. 8 zines. Inspired by her summer study abroad program with the Wordsworth Jerwood Centre and Cal Poly University Archives BEACoN research, she will take a gap year to work in community archives before attending graduate school in archival and preservation.

### Sarah Chayet | “A Pier for Resting”

Sarah is a fourth-year English Major with a minor in Studio Art. She is also participating in the Technical and Professional Communication Certificate program, where she is currently working on a project with SLO Climate Coalition. Sarah was a copyeditor for *Mustang News* and occasionally writes for *NOW*, a Los Angeles fashion magazine. *Intertidal* is her senior project, and she hopes that it continues to be a creative resource for students for many more volumes.

### Jack Fowler | “The Monster”

Jack is a fourth-year English and History major. When he's not editing *Intertidal*, Jack does volunteer work with his service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega, and tutors students in writing at Cal Poly's Writing and Learning Center. In his freetime, Jack enjoys obsessing over television or a good book. Jack also wrote a story about a dragon that is in this journal, and he thinks that's pretty cool.

### Renae Garcia-Pack

Renae is a fourth-year English Major who previously attended Sacramento City College after high school and later graduated from Allan Hancock College with degrees in Psychology, English, and Liberal Arts. She loves learning and is deeply interested in studying languages, cultures, and social issues. When Renae has free time, she enjoys playing video games with friends, taking care of her two cat children, reading, and going on walks in the cemetery. Editing and publishing *Intertidal* is her senior project; although her future plans are unclear, she hopes to go into editing and publishing with socially impactful and inclusive companies.

### Jenna Lyons

Jenna is a fourth-year English major with a minor in media arts, society, and technology. She is part of the *Intertidal* editorial team this year as her senior project. As a writer for the Nightcap, Cal Poly's sketch comedy team, Jenna enjoys silliness and laughter. This year she wrote and directed her first short film called *Boys Will Be Boys*. In her free time, Jenna likes watching reality tv shows, lying down, and the color pink.

**Sophie Stoll** | “Adulthood”

Sophie is a fourth-year English major and Law and Society minor. Along with serving as an editor for *Intertidal*, she is completing a Technical and Professional Communication Certificate through the Cal Poly English Department, where she interns for the Robert E. Kennedy Library as a UX researcher and web designer. She also in-corporates her interests in public health and graphic design through her positions at Partners in Health Engage at Cal Poly and the Central Coast Writers’ Conference. In her free time, she enjoys volunteering at pet shelters and traveling with friends and family.

**Malia Weingarten** | “Are Plant-Based Diets the End of Culture?”

Malia is a 4th-year English major with a minor in Italian Studies. She has previously worked with *H3R* Magazine and currently works as a tutor at Cal Poly’s Writing and Learning Center. She worked as *Intertidal*’s social media manager, and would like to thank the countless people who told her how funny the *Instagram* was (@cp.intertidal). In her free time, Malia loves dancing with United Movement, fashion and makeup, and making incredible puns. She also credits her success so far to caffeine, sugar, and the power of friendship.

For the first year ever, Intertidal has surfaced to showcase the art of Cal Poly's students and faculty. An 'intertidal zone' is an area where the ocean meets the land—hidden during the high tide and exposed during the low. Our journal embodies the moment where the tide recedes, revealing stories previously hidden.

Featuring the work of:

**Noah Ackerman | Tyra Adair | Noelle Amey | Shelby Anderson  
Elizabeth Brown | Claire Chan | Sarah Chayet | Gazelle Chen  
Dana Craighead | Jenna Dierkes | Josie Doan | Adriana Dutra  
Willow Faust | Jack Fowler | Madison Gonzalez | Alexandra Hardcastle  
Gavin Hart | Po Johnson | Chloe Keely | Asmahan Karam  
Brigitte Kime | Ashley Lang | Rebekah Lee | Sydney Lehr  
Tiffany Lerfald | Taylor Wendell Lozano | Anna Madruga | Sam Mosteller  
Janae Pabon | Ian Pines | Isaac Rudnick | Rebekah Shane  
Jade Stankowski | Maddie Stein | Sophie Stoll | Sarina Vachhani  
Joshua Venz | Malia Weingarten | Elise Wordal**